SPECIMENS

OF THE

BRITISH POETS;

WITH

BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL NOTICES,

AND

AN ESSAY ON ENGLISH POETRY.

BY THOMAS CAMPBELL.

IN SEVEN VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

ESSAY ON ENGLISH POETRY.

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ESSAY

ON

ENGLISH POETRY.

PART I.



ESSAY

ON

ENGLISH POETRY.

PART I.

The influence of the Norman conquest upon the language of England was like that of a great inundation, which at first buries the face of the landscape under its waters, but which at last subsiding, leaves behind it the elements of new beauty and fertility. Its first effect was to degrade the Anglo-Saxon tongue to the exclusive use of the inferior orders; and by the transference of estates, ecclesiastical benefices, and civil dignities, to Norman possessors, to give the French language, which had begun to prevail at court from the time of Edward the Con-

fessor, a more complete predominance among the higher classes of society. The native gentry of England were either driven into exile, or depressed into a state of dependance on their conqueror, which habituated them to speak his language. On the other hand, we received from the Normans the first germs of romantic poetry; and our language was ultimately indebted to them for a wealth and compass of expression, which it probably would not have otherwise possessed.

The Anglo-Saxon, however, was not lost, though it was superseded by French, and disappeared as the language of superior life and of public business. It is found written in prose, at the end of Stephen's reign, nearly a century after the conquest; and the Saxon Chronicle, which thus exhibits it, contains even a fragment of verse, professed to have been composed by an individual who had seen

William the Conqueror. To fix upon any precise time, when the national speech can be said to have ceased to be Saxon, and begun to be English, is pronounced by Dr. Johnson to be impossible[1]. It is undoubtedly difficult, if it be possible, from the gradually progressive nature of language, as well as from the doubt, with regard to dates, which hangs over the small number of specimens of the early tongue, which we possess. Mr. Ellis fixes upon a period of about forty years, preceding the accession of Henry III., from 1180 to 1216, during which, he conceives modern English to have been formed. The opinions of Mr. Ellis, which are always delivered with candour, and almost always founded on intelligent views, are not to be lightly treated; and I hope I shall not appear to be either captious or inconsiderate in disputing

[1] Introduction to Johnson's Dictionary.

them. But it seems to me, that he rather arbitrarily defines the number of years, which he supposes to have elapsed in the formation of our language, when he assigns forty years for that formation. He afterwards speaks of the vulgar English having *suddenly* superseded the pure and legitimate Saxon[1]. Now, if the supposed period could be fixed with any degree of accuracy to thirty or forty years, one might waive the question whether a transmutation occupying so much time could, with propriety or otherwise, be called a sudden one; but when we find that there are no sufficient data for fixing

[1] "The most striking peculiarity" (says Mr. Ellis) "in the establishment of our vulgar English "is, that it seems to have very suddenly superseded "the pure and legitimate Saxon, from which its "elements were principally derived, instead of be-"coming its successor, as generally has been sup-"posed, by a slow and imperceptible progress." *Specimens of Early English Poetry*, vol. ii. p. 404.

its boundaries even to fifty years, the idea of a sudden transition in the language becomes inadmissible.

The mixture of our literature and language with the Norman, or, in other words, the formation of English, commenced, according to Mr. Ellis, in 1180. At that period, he calculates that Layamon, the first translator from French into the native tongue, finished his version of Wace's "Brut." This translation, however, he pronounces to be still unmixed, though barbarous Saxon. It is certainly not very easy to conceive how the sudden and distinct formation of English can be said to have commenced with unmixed Saxon; but Mr. Ellis, possibly, meant the period of Layamon's work to be the date *after*, and not *at* which the change may be understood to have begun. Yet, while he pronounces Layamon's language unmixed Saxon, he considers it to be such a sort of Saxon as required but the substitution of a few French for Saxon

words to become English. Nothing more, in Mr. Ellis's opinion, was necessary to change the old into the new native tongue, and to produce an exact resemblance between the Saxon of the twelfth century, and the English of the thirteenth; early in which century, according to Mr. Ellis, the new language was fully formed, or, as he afterwards more cautiously expresses himself, was "*in its far advanced state.*" The reader will please to recollect, that the two main circumstances in the change of Anglo-Saxon into English, are the adoption of French words, and the suppression of the inflections of the Saxon noun and verb. Now, if Layamon's style exhibits a language needing only a few French words to be convertible into English, the Anglo-Saxon must have made some progress before Layamon's time to an English form. Whether that progress was made rapidly, or suddenly, we have not sufficient specimens of the language, anterior to Laya-

mon, to determine. But that the change was not sudden but gradual, I conceive, is much more probably to be presumed[1].

Layamon, however, whether we call him Saxon or English, certainly exhibits a dawn of English. And when did this dawn appear? Mr. Ellis computes that it was in 1180, placing it thus late, be-

[1] If Layamon's work was finished in 1180, the verses in the Saxon Chronicle, on the death of William the Conqueror, said to be written by one who had seen that monarch, cannot be considered as a specimen of the language immediately anterior to Layamon. But St. Godric is said to have died in 1170, and the verses ascribed to him might have been written at a time nearly preceding Layamon's work. Of St. Godric's verses a very few may be compared with a few of Layamon's.

St. Godric.

Sainté Marie Christie's bur!
Maiden's clenhud, Modere's flur!
Dillie mine sinnen, rix in mine mod,
Bring me to winne with selfé God.

In English. Saint Mary, Christ's bower—Maiden's purity, Motherhood's flower—Destroy my

cause Wace took a great many years to translate his "Brut" from Geoffrey of Monmouth; and because Layamon, who translated that "Brut," was probably twenty-five years engaged in the task. But this is attempting to be precise in dates, where there is no ground for precision. It is quite as easy to suppose that the English translator finished his

sin, reign in my mood or mind—Bring me to dwell with the very God.

Layamon.

And of alle than folke
The wuneden ther on folde,
Wes thisses landes folk
Leodene hendest itald;
And alswa the wimmen
Wunliche on heowen.

In English. And of all the folk that dwelt on earth was this land's folk the handsomest, (people told;) and also the women handsome of hue.

Here are four lines of St. Godric, in all probability earlier than Layamon's; and yet does the English reader find Layamon at all more intelligible, or does he seem to make any thing like a sudden transition to English as the poetical successor of St. Godric?

work in ten as in twenty years; so that the change from Saxon to English would commence in 1265, and thus the forty years Exodus of our language, supposing it bounded to 1216, would extend to half a century. So difficult is it to fix any definite period for the commencing formation of English. It is easy to speak of a child being born at an express time; but the birth-epochs of languages are not to be registered with the same precision and facility. Again, as to the end of Mr. Ellis's period: it is inferred by him, that the formation of the language was either completed or far advanced in 1216, from the facility of rhyming displayed in Robert of Gloucester, and in pieces belonging to the middle of the thirteenth century or perhaps to an earlier date. I own that, to me, this theorizing by conjecture seems like stepping in quicksand. Robert of Gloucester wrote in 1280; and surely his rhyming with facility *then*, does not prove the English language to have

been fully formed in 1216. But we have pieces, it seems, which are supposed to have been written early in the thirteenth century. To give any support to Mr. Ellis's theory, such pieces must be proved to have been produced very early in the thirteenth century. Their coming towards the middle of it, and shewing facility of rhyming at that late date, will prove little, or nothing.

But of these poetical fragments *supposed* to commence either with or early in the thirteenth century, our antiquaries afford us dates which, though often confidently pronounced, are really only conjectural; and, in fixing those conjectural dates, they are by no means agreed. Warton speaks of this and that article being certainly not later than the reign of Richard I.; but he takes no pains to authenticate what he affirms. He pronounces the love song, "Blow, blow, thou northern wind," to be as old as the year 1200. Mr. Ellis puts it off only to

about half a century later. Hickes places the "Land of Cokayne" just after the Conquest. Mr. Warton would place it *before* the Conquest, if he were not deterred by the appearance of a few Norman words, and by the learned authority of Hickes. Layamon would thus be superseded, as quite a modern. The truth is, respecting the "Land of Cokayne," that we are left in total astonishment at the circumstance of men, so well informed as Hickes and Warton, placing it either before or immediately after the Conquest, as its language is comparatively modern. It contains allusions to pinnacles in buildings, which were not introduced till the reign of Henry III. Mr. Ellis is not so rash as to place that production, which Hickes and Warton removed to near the Conquest, earlier than the thirteenth century; and I believe it may be placed even late in that century. In short, where shall we fix upon the first poem that is decidedly

English? and how shall we ascertain its date to a certainty within any moderate number of years? Instead of supposing the period of the formation of English to commence at 1180, and to end at 1216, we might, without violence to any known fact, extend it back to *several* years earlier, and bring it down to a *great many* years later. In the fair idea of English we surely, in general, understand a considerable mixture of French words. Now, whatever may have been done in the twelfth century, with regard to that change from Saxon to English, which consists in the extinction of Saxon grammatical inflections, it is plain that the other characteristic of English, viz. its Gallicism, was only beginning in the thirteenth century. The English language could not be said to be saturated with French, till the days of Chaucer; i. e. it did not, till his time, receive all the French words which it was capable of retaining. Mr. Ellis nevertheless tells us that the

vulgar English, not gradually, but suddenly, superseded the legitimate Saxon. When this sudden succession precisely began, it seems to be as difficult to ascertain, as when it ended. The sudden transition, by Mr. Ellis's own theory, occupied about forty years; and, to all appearance, that term might be lengthened, with respect to its commencement and continuance, to fourscore years at least.

The Saxon language, we are told, had ceased to be poetically cultivated for some time previous to the Conquest. This might be the case with regard to lofty efforts of composition, but Ingulphus, the secretary of William the Conqueror, speaks of the popular ballads of the English, in praise of their heroes, which were sung about the streets; and William of Malmsbury, in the twelfth century, continues to make mention of them[1].

[1] William of Malmsbury drew much of his information from those Saxon ballads.

The pretensions of these ballads to the name of poetry we are unhappily, from the loss of them, unable to estimate. For a long time after the Conquest, the native minstrelsy, though it probably was never altogether extinct, may be supposed to have sunk to the lowest ebb. No human pursuit is more sensible than poetry to national pride or mortification, and a race of peasants, like the Saxons, struggling for bare subsistence, under all the dependance, and without the protection, of the feudal system, were in a state the most ungenial to feelings of poetical enthusiasm. For more than one century after the Conquest, as we are informed, an Englishman was a term of contempt. So much has time altered the associations attached to a name, which we should now employ as the first appeal to the pride or intrepidity of those who bear it. By degrees, however, the Norman and native races began to coalesce, and their patriot-

ism and political interests to be identified. The crown and aristocracy having become during their struggles, to a certain degree, candidates for the favour of the people, and rivals in affording them protection, free burghs and chartered corporations were increased, and commerce and social intercourse began to quicken. Mr. Ellis alludes to an Anglo-Norman jargon having been spoken in commercial intercourse, from which he conceives our synonymes to have been derived. That individuals, imperfectly understanding each other, might accidentally speak a broken jargon may be easily conceived; but that such a *lingua Franca* was ever the distinct dialect, even of a mercantile class, Mr. Ellis proves neither by specimens nor historical evidence. The synonymes in our language may certainly be accounted for by the gradual entrance of French words, without supposing an intermediate jargon. The national speech,

it is true, received a vast influx of French words; but it received them by degrees, and subdued them, as they came in, to its own idioms and grammar.

Yet, difficult as it may be to pronounce precisely when Saxon can be said to have ceased and English to have begun, it must be supposed that the progress and improvement of the national speech was most considerable at those epochs, which tended to restore the importance of the people. The hypothesis of a sudden transmutation of Saxon into English appears, on the whole, not to be distinctly made out. At the same time, some public events might be highly favourable to the progress and cultivation of the language. Of those events, the establishment of municipal governments and of elective magistrates in the towns, must have been very important, as they furnished materials and incentives for daily discussion and popular eloquence. As

property and security increased among the people, we may also suppose the native minstrelsy to have revived. The minstrels, or those who wrote for them, translated or imitated Norman romances; and, in so doing, enriched the language with many new words, which they borrowed from the originals, either from want of corresponding terms in their own vocabulary, or from the words appearing to be more agreeable. Thus, in a general view, we may say that, amidst the early growth of her commerce, literature, and civilization, England acquired the new form of her language, which was destined to carry to the ends of the earth the blessings from which it sprung.

In the formation of English from its Saxon and Norman materials, the genius of the native tongue might be said to prevail, as it subdued to Saxon grammar and construction the numerous French words, which found their way into the

language[1]. But it was otherwise with respect to our poetry—in which, after the Conquest, the Norman Muse must be regarded as the earliest preceptress of our own. Mr. Tyrwhitt has even said, and his opinion seems to be generally adopted, that we are indebted for the use of rhyme, and for all the forms of our versification, entirely to the Normans[2]. Whatever

[1] Vide Tyrwhitt's preface to the Canterbury Tales, where a distinct account is given of the grammatical changes exhibited in the rise and progress of English.

[2] It is likely that the Normans would have taught us the use of rhyme and their own metres, whether these had been known or not to the Anglo-Saxons before the Conquest. But respecting Mr. Tyrwhitt's position that we owe all our forms of verse, and the use of rhyme, entirely to the Normans, I trust the reader will pardon me for introducing a mere *doubt* on a subject which cannot be interesting to many. With respect to rhyme, I might lay some stress on the authority of Mr. Turner, who, in his History of the Anglo-Saxons, says that the Anglo-Saxon versification possessed occasional rhyme; but as he admits that rhyme formed no part of its

might be the case with regard to our forms of versification, the chief employ-

constituent character, for fear of assuming too much, let it be admitted that we have no extant specimens of rhyme in our language before the Conquest. One stanza of a ballad shall indeed be mentioned, as an exception to this, which may be admitted or rejected at the reader's pleasure. In the mean time let it be recollected, that if we have not rhyme in the vernacular verse, we have examples of it in the poetry of the Anglo-Saxon churchmen—abundance of it in Bede's and Boniface's Latin verses. We meet also, in the same writers, with lines which resemble modern verse in their trochaic and iambic structure, considering that structure not as classical but accentual metre.—Take, for example, these verses:

" Quando Christus Deus noster
" Natus est ex Virgine—"

which go precisely in the same cadence with such modern trochaics as

" Would you hear how once repining
" Great Eliza captive lay."

And we have many such lines as these:

" Ut floreas cum domino
" In sempiterno solio
" Qua Martyres in cuneo," &c.

ment of our earliest versifiers certainly was to transplant the fictions of the Nor-

which flow exactly like the lines in L'Allegro :

> " The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty.
> * * * * * * *
> " And pomp, and feast, and revelry,
> " With masque, and antique pageantry."

Those Latin lines are, in fact, a prototype of our own eight syllable iambic. It is singular that rhyme and such metres as the above, which are generally supposed to have come into the other modern languages from the Latin rhymes of the church, should not have found their way from thence into the Anglo-Saxon vernacular verse. But they certainly did not, we shall be told; for there is no appearance of them in the specimens of Anglo-Saxon verse, before the Conquest. Of such specimens, however, it is not pretended that we have any thing like a full or regular series. On the contrary, many Saxon ballads, which have been alluded to by Anglo-Norman writers as of considerable antiquity, have been lost with the very names of their composers. And from a few articles saved in such a wreck, can we pronounce confidently on the whole contents of the cargo? The following solitary stanza, however,

man school, and to naturalize them in our language.

has been preserved, from a ballad attributed to Canute the Great.

"Merry sungen the Muneches binnen Ely,
"The Cnut Ching reüther by,
"Roweth Cnites noer the land,
"And here we thes Muniches sang."

"Merry sang the Monks in Ely,
"When Canute King was sailing by:
"Row, ye knights, near the land,
"And let us hear these Monks' song."

There is something very like rhyme in the Anglo-Saxon stanza. I have no doubt that Canute heard the monks singing Latin rhymes; and I have some suspicion that he finished his Saxon ballad in rhyme also. Thomas of Ely, who knew the whole song, translates his specimen of it in Latin lines, which, whether by accident or design, rhyme to each other. The genius of the ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry, Mr. Turner observes, was obscure, periphrastical, and elliptical; but, according to that writer's conjecture, a new and humble but perspicuous style of poetry was introduced at a later time, in the shape of the

The most liberal patronage was afforded to Norman minstrelsy in England by the first kings of the new dynasty. This encouragement, and the consequent cultivation of the northern dialect of French, gave it so much the superiority over the southern or troubadour dialect, that the French language, according to the acknowledgment of its best informed antiquaries, received from England and Normandy, the first of its works which deserve to be cited. The Norman trouveurs, it is allowed, were more eminent narrative poets than the Provençal troubadours. No people had a better right to be the founders of chivalrous poetry than the Normans. They were the most energetic generation of

narrative ballad. In this plainer style we may conceive the possibility of rhyme having found a place; because the verse would stand in need of that ornament to distinguish it from prose, more than in the elliptical and inverted manner. With regard to our

modern men. Their leader, by the conquest of England in the eleventh century, consolidated the feudal system upon a broader basis than it ever had before possessed. Before the end of the same century, Chivalry rose to its full growth as an institution, by the circumstance of martial zeal being enlisted under the banners of superstition. The crusades, though they certainly did not give birth to jousts and tournaments, must have imparted to them a new spirit and interest, as the preparatory images of a consecrated warfare. And those spectacles constituted a source of description to the romancers, to which no exact counterpart is to be found in the heroic poetry of antiquity. But the growth of what may properly be called

anapæstic measure, or triple-time verse, Dr. Percy has shewn that its rudiments can be traced to Scaldic poetry. It is often found very distinct in Langlande; and that species of verse, at least, I conceive, is not necessarily to be referred to a Norman origin.

romantic poetry, was not instantaneous after the Conquest; and it was not till " English Richard ploughed the deep," that the crusaders seem to have found a place among the heroes of romance. Till the middle of the twelfth century, or possibly later, no work of professed fiction, or bearing any semblance to epic fable, can be traced in Norman verse—nothing but songs, satires, chronicles, or didactic works, to all of which, however, the name of romance, derived from the Roman descent of the French tongue, was applied in the early and wide acceptation of the word. To these succeeded the genuine metrical romance, which, though often rhapsodical and desultory, had still invention, ingenuity, and design, sufficient to distinguish it from the dry and dreary chronicle. The reign of French metrical romance may be chiefly assigned to the latter part of the twelfth, and the whole of the thir-

teenth century; that of English metrical romance, to the latter part of the thirteenth, and the whole of the fourteenth[1] century. Those ages of chivalrous song were, in the meantime, fraught with events which, while they undermined the feudal system, gradually prepared the way for the decline of chivalry itself. Literature and science were commencing, and even in the improvement of the mechanical skill, employed to heighten chivalrous or superstitious magnificence, the seeds of arts, industry, and plebeian independence were unconsciously sown. One invention, that of gun-powder, is eminently marked out, as the cause of the extinction of Chivalry; but even if that invention had not taken place, it may well be conjectured that the contrivance of other means of missile destruction in

[1] The practice of translating French rhyming romances into English verse, however, continued down to the reign of Henry VII.

war, and the improvement of tactics, would have narrowed that scope for the prominence of individual prowess, which was necessary for the chivalrous character, and that the progress of civilization must have ultimately levelled its romantic consequence. But to anticipate the remote effects of such causes, if scarcely within the ken of philosophy, was still less within the reach of poetry. Chivalry was still in all its glory; and to the eye of the poet appeared as likely as ever to be immortal. The progress of civilization even ministered to its external importance. The early arts made chivalrous life, with all its pomp and ceremonies, more august and imposing, and more picturesque as a subject for description. Literature, for a time, contributed to the same effect, by her jejune and fabulous efforts at history, in which the athletic worthies of classical story and of modern romance were gravely connected

by an ideal genealogy[1]. Thus the dawn of human improvement smiled on the fabric which it was ultimately to destroy, as the morning sun gilds and beautifies those masses of frost-work, which are to melt before its noonday heat.

[1] Geoffrey of Monmouth's history, of which the modern opinion seems to be, that it was not a forgery, but derived from an Armorican original, and the pseudo-Turpin's Life of Charlemagne, were the grand historical magazines of the romancers. Popular songs about Arthur and Charlemagne, (or, as some will have it, Charles Martel), were probably the main sources of Turpin's forgery and of Geoffrey's Armorican book. Even the proverbial mendacity of the pseudo-Turpin must have been indebted for the leading hints to songs that were extant respecting Charlemagne. The stream of fiction having thus spread itself in those grand prose reservoirs, afterwards flowed out from thence again in the shape of verse, with a force renewed by accumulation. Once more, as if destined to alternations, romance, after the fourteenth century, returned to the shape of prose, and in many instances made and carried pretensions to the sober credibility of history.

The elements of romantic fiction have been traced up to various sources; but neither the Scaldic, nor Saracenic, nor Armorican theory of its origin can sufficiently account for all its materials. Many of them are classical, and others derived from the scriptures. The migrations of science are difficult enough to be traced; but Fiction travels on still lighter wings, and scatters the seeds of her wild flowers imperceptibly over the world, till they surprise us by springing up with similarity in regions the most remotely divided. There was a vague and unselecting love of the marvellous in romance, which sought for adventures, like its knights errant, in every quarter where they could be found; so that it is easier to admit of all the sources which are imputed to that species of fiction, than to limit our belief to any one of them.

Norman verse dwelt for a considerable time in the tedious historic style,

before it reached the shape of amusing fable; and we find the earliest efforts of the native Muse confined to translating Norman verse, while it still retained its uninviting form of the chronicle. The first of the Norman poets, from whom any versifier in the language is known to have translated, was Wace, a native of Jersey, born in the reign of Henry II. In the year 1155, Wace finished his "Brut d'Angleterre," which is a French version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of Great Britain, deduced from Brutus to Cadwallader, in 689. Layamon, a priest of Ernesley upon Severn, translated Wace's Metrical Chronicle into the verse of the popular tongue; and notwithstanding Mr. Ellis's date of 1180, may be supposed, with equal probability, to have produced his work within ten or fifteen years after the middle of the twelfth century. Layamon's translation may be considered as

the earliest specimen of metre in the native language, posterior to the Conquest; except some lines in the Saxon Chronicle on the death of William I. and a few religious rhymes, which, according to Matthew Paris, the Blessed Virgin was pleased to dictate to St. Godric, the hermit, near Durham; unless we add to these the specimen of Saxon poetry published in the Archaeologia by Mr. Conybeare, who supposes that composition to be posterior to the Conquest, and to be the last expiring voice of the Saxon Muse[1]. Of the dialect of Layamon, Mr. Mitford, in his Harmony of Languages, observes, that it has all

[1] Two specimens of the ancient state of the language; viz. the stanzas on old age, beginning "He may him sore adreden," and the quotation from the Ormulum, which Dr. Johnson placed, on the authority of Hickes, nearly after the Conquest, are considered by Mr. Tyrwhitt to be of a later date than Layamon's translation. Their language is certainly more modern.

the appearance of a language thrown into confusion by the circumstances of those who spoke it. It is truly neither Saxon nor English. Mr. Ellis's opinion of its being simple Saxon has been already noticed. So little agreed are the most ingenious speculative men on the characteristics of style, which they shall entitle Saxon or English. We may, however, on the whole, consider the style of Layamon to be as nearly the intermediate state of the old and new languages, as can be found in any ancient specimen: —something like the new insect stirring its wings, before it has shaken off the aurelia state. But of this work, or of any specimen *supposed* to be written in the early part of the thirteenth century, displaying a sudden transition from Saxon to English, I am disposed to repeat my doubts.

Without being over credulous about the antiquity of the Lives of the Saints, **Thirteenth century.**

and the other fragments of the thirteenth century, which Mr. Ellis places in chronological succession next to Layamon, we may allow that before the date of Robert of Gloucester, not only the legendary and devout style, but the amatory and satirical, had begun to be rudely cultivated in the language. It was customary, in that age, to make the minstrels sing devotional strains to the harp, on Sundays, for the edification of the people, instead of the verses on gayer subjects, which were sung at public entertainments; a circumstance which, while it indicates the usual care of the Catholic church to make use of every hold over the popular mind, discovers also the fondness of the people for their poetry, and the attractions which it had already begun to assume. Of the satirical style I have already alluded to one example in the "Land of Cokayne," an allegorical satire on the luxury of the church, couched

under the description of an imaginary paradise, in which the nuns are represented as houris, and the black and grey monks as their paramours. This piece has humour, though not of the most delicate kind; and the language is easy and fluent, but it possesses nothing of style, sentiment, or imagery, approaching to poetry. Another specimen of the pleasantry of the times is more valuable; because it exhibits the state of party feeling on real events, as well as the state of the language at a precise time[1]. It is a ballad, entitled "Richard of Almaigne," composed by one of the adherents of Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, after the defeat of the royal party at the battle of Lewes, in

[1] "Though some make slight of libels," says Selden, "yet you may see by them how the wind "sits; as, take a straw, and throw it up into the "air, you shall see by that which way the wind is, "which you shall not do by casting up a stone. "More solid things do not shew the complexion of "the times, so well as *ballads and libels.*"

1264. In the year after that battle the royal cause was restored, and the Earl of Warren and Sir Hugh Bigod returned from exile, and assisted in the king's victory. In this satirical ballad, those two personages are threatened with death, if they should ever fall into the hands of their enemies. Such a song and such threats must have been composed by Leicester's party in the moment of their triumph, and not after their defeat and dispersion; so that the date of the piece is ascertained by its contents. This political satire leads me to mention another, which the industrious Ritson published[1], and which, without violent anachronism, may be spoken of among the specimens of the thirteenth century; as it must have been composed within a few years after its close, and relates to events within its verge. It is a ballad on the execution of the Scottish patriots, Sir William Wallace

[1] Ritson's Ancient Songs.

and Sir Simon Fraser. The diction is as barbarous as we should expect from a song of triumph on such a subject. It relates the death and treatment of Wallace very minutely. The circumstance of his being covered with a mock crown of laurel in Westminster-hall, which Stowe repeats, is there mentioned; and that of his legs being fastened with iron fetters "*under his horses wombe,*" is told with savage exultation. The piece was probably endited in the very year of the political murders which it celebrates: certainly before 1314, as it mentions the skulking of Robert Bruce, which, after the battle of Bannockburn, must have become a jest out of season.

A few love-songs of that early period have been preserved, which are not wholly destitute of beauty and feeling. Their expression, indeed, is often quaint, and loaded with alliteration; yet it is impossible to look without a pleasing interest

upon strains of tenderness which carry us back to so remote an age, and which disclose to us the softest emotions of the human mind, in times abounding with such opposite traits of historical recollection. Such a stanza as the following[1] would not disgrace the lyric poetry of a refined age.

For her love I cark and care,
For her love I droop and dare;
For her love my bliss is bare,
And all I wax wan.
For her love in sleep I slake[2],
For her love all night I wake;
For her love mourning I make
More than any man.

In another pastoral strain the lover says:

When the nightingale singés the woods waxen green;
Leaf, grass, and blossom, springs in Avril, I ween:

[1] It is here stript of its antiquated spelling.
[2] I am deprived of sleep.

And love is to my heart gone with one spear so keen,
Night and day my blood it drinks—my heart doth
me teen.

Robert, a monk of Gloucester, whose surname is unknown, is supposed to have finished his Rhyming Chronicle about the year 1280. He translated the Legends of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and continued the History of England down to the time of Edward I., in the beginning of whose reign he died. The topographical, as well as narrative, minuteness of his Chronicle has made it a valuable authority to antiquaries; and as such it was consulted by Selden, when he wrote his Notes to Drayton's Polyolbion. After observing some traits of humour and sentiment, moderate as they may be, in compositions as old as the middle of the thirteenth century, we might naturally expect to find in Robert of Gloucester not indeed a decidedly poetical manner, but some approach to the animation of

poetry. But the Chronicle of this *English Ennius*, as he has been called, whatever progress in the state of the language it may display, comes in reality nothing nearer the character of a work of imagination than Layamon's version of Wace, which preceded it by a hundred years. One would not imagine, from Robert of Gloucester's style, that he belonged to a period when a single effusion of sentiment, or a trait of humour and vivacity, had appeared in the language. On the contrary, he seems to take us back to the nonage of poetry, when verse is employed not to harmonize and beautify expression, but merely to assist the memory. Were we to judge of Robert of Gloucester not as a chronicler, but as a candidate for the honours of fancy, we might be tempted to wonder at the frigidity with which he dwells, as the first possessor of such poetical ground, on the history of Lear, of Arthur, and

Merlin; and with which he describes a scene so susceptible of poetical effect, as the irruption of the first crusaders into Asia, preceded by the sword of fire which hung in the firmament, and guided them eastward in their path. But, in justice to the ancient versifier, we should remember, that he had still only a rude language to employ—the speech of boors and burghers, which, though it might possess a few songs and satires, could afford him no models of heroic narration. In such an age, the first occupant passes uninspired over subjects, which might kindle the highest enthusiasm in the poet of a riper period; as the savage treads unconsciously, in his deserts, over mines of incalculable value, without sagacity to discover, or implements to explore them. In reality, his object was but to be historical. The higher orders of society still made use of French; and scholars wrote in that language or in Latin. His Chronicle was therefore recited to a class of

his contemporaries, to whom it must have been highly acceptable, as a history of their native country believed to be authentic, and composed in their native tongue. To the fabulous legends of antiquity he added a record of more recent events, with some of which he was contemporary. As a relater of events, he is tolerably succinct and perspicuous; and wherever the fact is of any importance, he shews a watchful attention to keep the reader's memory distinct with regard to chronology, by making the date of the year rhyme to something prominent in the narration of the fact.

rteenth tury.

Our first known versifier of the fourteenth century is Robert, commonly called de Brunne. He was born (according to his editor Hearne) at Malton, in Yorkshire; lived for some time in the house of Sixhill, a Gilbertine monastery in Yorkshire; and afterwards became a member of Brunne, or Browne, a priory of black canons in the same county.

His real surname was Mannyng; but the writers of history in those times (as Hearne observes) were generally the religious, and when they became celebrated, they were designated by the names of the religious houses to which they belonged. Thus, William of Malmsbury, Matthew of Westminster, and John of Glastonbury, received those appellations from their respective monasteries. De Brunne was, as far as we know, only a translator. His principal performance is a Rhyming Chronicle of the History of England, in two parts, compiled from the works of Wace and Peter de Langtoft[1]. The declared object of his work is " Not for the lerid (learned) but for the lewed (the low).

[1] Peter de Langtoft was a canon of Bridlington, in Yorkshire, of Norman origin, but born in England. He wrote an entire History of England in French rhymes, down to the end of the reign of Edward I.—Robert de Brunne, in his Chronicle, follows Wace in the earlier part of his history, but translates the latter part of it from Langtoft.

"For tho[1] that in this land wonn[2],
"That the latyn no[3] Frankys[4] conn[5]."

He seems to reckon, however, if not on the attention of the "lerid," at least on that of a class above the "lewed," as he begins his address to "Lordynges that be now here." He declares also that his verse was constructed simply, being intended neither for seggers (reciters), nor harpours (harpers). Yet it is clear from another passage, that he intended his Chronicle to be sung, at least by parts, at public festivals. In the present day it would require considerable vocal powers to make so dry a recital of facts, as that of De Brunne's work, entertaining to an audience; but it appears that he could offer one of the most ancient apologies of authorship, namely, "the request of friends"—for he says,

"Men besoght me many a time
"To torn it bot in light rhyme."

[1] Those.—[2] live.—[3] nor.—[4] French.—[5] know.

His Chronicle, it seems, was likely to be an acceptable work to social parties, assembled

> "For to haf solace and gamen[1]
> "In fellawship when they sit samen[2]."

In rude states of society, verse is attached to many subjects from which it is afterwards divorced by the progress of literature; and primitive poetry is found to be the organ not only of history, but of science[3], theology, and of law itself. The ancient laws of the Athenians were sung at their public banquets. Even in modern times, and within the last century, the laws of Sweden were published in verse.

[1] Game.—[2] Together.

[3] Virgil, when he carries us back to very ancient manners, in the picture of Dido's feast, appropriately makes astronomy the first subject with which the bard Iopas entertains his audience.

> Cithara crinitus Iopas
> Personat aurata, docuit quæ maximus Atlas;
> Hic canit errantem lunam, solisque labores.

ÆNEID I.

De Brunne's versification, throughout the body of the work, is sometimes the entire Alexandrine, rhyming in couplets; but for the most part it is only the half Alexandrine, with alternate rhymes. He thus affords a ballad metre, which seems to justify the conjecture of Hearne, that our most ancient ballads were only fragments of metrical histories. By this time (for the date of De Brunne's Chronicle brings us down to the year 1339[1]) our popular ballads must have long added the redoubted names of Randle of Chester, and Robin Hood, to their list of native subjects. Both of these worthies had died before the middle of the preceding century, and, in the course of the next 100 years, their names became so popular in English song, that Langlande, in the fourteenth century, makes it part of the confession of a sluggard, that he

[1] Robert de Brunne, it appears, from internal evidence, finished his Chronicle in May of that year. —Ritson's Minot. XIII.

was unable to repeat his paternoster, though he knew plenty of rhymes about Randle of Chester and Robin Hood. None of the extant ballads about Robin Hood are, however, of any great antiquity.

The style of Robert de Brunne is less marked by Saxonisms than that of Robert of Gloucester; and though he can scarcely be said to come nearer the character of a true poet than his predecessor, he is certainly a smoother versifier, and evinces more facility in rhyming. It is amusing to find his editor, Hearne, so anxious to defend the moral memory of a writer, respecting whom not a circumstance is known, beyond the date of his works, and the names of the monasteries where he wore his cowl.* From his willingness to favour the people with historic rhymes for their "fellawship and gamen," Hearne infers that he must have been of a jocular temper. It seems, however, that the priory of Sixhill, where he

lived for some time, was a house which consisted of women as well as men, a discovery which alarms the good antiquary for the fame of his author's personal purity. Can we therefore think, continues Hearne, "that since he was of "a jocular temper, he could be wholly "free from vice, or that he should not "sometimes express himself loosely to "the sisters of that place? This ob-"jection (he gravely continues) would "have had some weight, had the priory "of Sixhill been any way noted for "luxury or lewdness; but whereas every "member of it, both men and women, "were very chaste, we ought by no means "to suppose that Robert of Brunne be-"haved himself otherwise than became a "good Christian, during his whole abode "there." This conclusive reasoning, it may be hoped, will entirely set at rest any idle suspicions that may have crept into the reader's mind, respecting the chastity of Robert de Brunne. It may

be added, that his writings betray not the least symptom of his having been either an Abelard among priests, or an Ovid among poets.

Considerably before the date of Robert de Brunne's Chronicle, as we learn from De Brunne himself, the English minstrels, or those who wrote for them, had imitated from the French many compositions more poetical than those historical canticles, namely, genuine romances. In most of those metrical stories, irregular and shapeless as they were, if we compare them with the symmetrical structure of epic fable, there was still some portion of interest, and a catastrophe brought about, after various obstacles and difficulties, by an agreeable surprise. The names of the writers of our early English romances have not, except in one or two instances, been even conjectured, nor have the dates of the majority of them been ascertained, with any thing like

precision. But in a general view, the era of English metrical romance may be said to have commenced towards the end of the thirteenth century. Warton, indeed, would place the commencement of our romance poetry considerably earlier; but Ritson challenges a proof of any English romance being known or mentioned, before the close of Edward I.'s reign, about which time, that is, the end of the thirteenth century, he conjectures that the romance of Hornchild may have been composed. It would be pleasing, if it were possible, to extend the claims of English genius in this department, to any considerable number of original pieces. But English romance poetry having grown out of that of France, seems never to have improved upon its original, or, rather, it may be allowed to have fallen beneath it. As to the originality of old English poems of this kind, we meet, in some of them, with heroes,

whose Saxon names might lead us to suppose them indigenous fictions, which had not come into the language through a French medium. Several old Saxon ballads are alluded to, as extant long after the Conquest, by the Anglo-Norman historians, who drew from them many facts and inferences; and there is no saying how many of these ballads might be recast into a romantic shape by the composers for the native minstrelsy. But, on the other hand, the Anglo Normans appear to have been more inquisitive into Saxon legends than the Saxons themselves; and their Muse was by no means so illiberal as to object to a hero, because he was not of their own generation. In point of fact, whatever may be alleged about the minstrels of the North Country, it is difficult, if it be possible, to find an English romance which contains no internal allusion to a French prototype. Ritson very grudgingly allows,

that three old stories may be called original English romances, until a Norman original shall be found for them[1]; while

[1] Those are, "The Squire of Low Degree," "Sir Tryamour," and "Sir Eglamour." Respecting two of those Mr. Ellis shews, that Ritson might have spared himself the trouble of making any concession, as the antiquity of The Squire of Low Degree remains to be proved, it being mentioned by no writer before the sixteenth century, and not being known to be extant in any ancient MS. Sir Eglamour contains allusions to its Norman pedigree.

The difficulty of finding an original South British romance of this period, unborrowed from a French original, seems to remain undisputed: but Mr. Walter Scott, in his edition of "Sir Tristrem," has presented the public with an ancient Scottish romance, which, according to Mr. Scott's theory, would demonstrate the English language to have been cultivated earlier in Scotland than in England. In a different part of these Selections, vol. I. p. 67, I have expressed myself in terms of more unqualified assent to the supposition of Thomas of Erceldoun having been an *original* romancer, than I should be inclined to use upon mature consideration. Robert de Brunne certainly alludes to Sir Tristrem, as "the most famous of all

Mr. Tyrwhitt conceives, that we have not one English romance anterior to Chaucer, which is not borrowed from a French one.

gests" in his time. He mentions Erceldoun, its author, and another poet of the name of Kendale. Of Kendale, whether he was Scotch or English, nothing seems to be known with certainty. With respect to Thomas of Erceldoun, or Thomas the Rhymer, the Auchinleck MS. published by my illustrious friend, professes to be the work not of Erceldoun himself, but of some minstrel or reciter who had heard the story from Thomas. Its language is confessed to be that of the fourteenth century, and the MS. is not pretended to be less than eighty years older than the supposed date of Thomas of Erceldoun's romance. Accordingly, whatever Thomas the Rhymer's production might be, this Auchinleck MS. is not a transcript of it, but the transcript of the composition of some one, who heard the story from Thomas of Erceldoun. It is a specimen of Scottish poetry not in the thirteenth, but the fourteenth century. How much of the matter or manner of Thomas the Rhymer was retained by his deputy reciter of the story, eighty years after the assumed date of Thomas's work, is a subject of mere conjecture.

Still, however, the fame of Erceldoun and Tho-

In the reign of Edward II. Adam Davie, who was marshall of Stratford-le-Bow, near London, wrote "Visions in

trem remain attested by Robert de Brunne: and Mr. Scott's doctrine is, that Thomas the Rhymer having picked up the chief materials of his romantic history of Sir Tristrem, from British traditions surviving on the border, was not a translator from the French, but an original authority to the continental romancers. It is nevertheless acknowledged, that the story of Sir Tristrem had been told in French, and was familiar to the romancers of that language, long before Thomas the Rhymer could have set about picking up British traditions on the border, and in all probability before he was born. The possibility, therefore, of his having heard the story in Norman minstrelsy, is put beyond the reach of denial. On the other hand, Mr Scott argues, that the Scottish bard must have been an authority to the continental romancers, from two circumstances. In the first place, there are two metrical fragments of French romance preserved in the library of Mr. Douce, which, according to Mr Scott, tell the story of Sir Tristrem in a manner corresponding with the same tale as it is told by Thomas of Erceldoun, and in which a reference is made to the authority of *a Thomas*. But

Verse," which appear to be original; and the "Battle of Jerusalem," in which he turned into rhyme the contents of a

the whole force of this argument evidently depends on the supposition of Mr. Douce's fragments being the work of one and the same author—whereas they are not to all appearance by the same author. A single perusal will enable us to observe how remarkably they differ in style. They have no appearance of being parts of the same story, one of them placing the court of King Mark at Tintagil, the other at London. Only one of the fragments refers to the authority of a Thomas, and the style of that one bears very strong marks of being French of the twelfth century, a date which would place it beyond the possibility of its referring to Thomas of Erceldoun. The second of Mr. Scott's proofs of the originality of the Scottish Romance is, that Gotfried, of Strasburg, in a German romance, written about the middle of the thirteenth century, refers to Thomas of Britannia as his original. Thomas of Britannia is, however, a vague word; and among the Anglo-Norman poets there might be one named Thomas, who might have told a story which was confessedly told in many shapes in the French language, and which was known in France before

French prose romance[1]. In the course of Adam Davie's account of the siege of Jerusalem, Pilate challenges our Lord to single combat. From the specimens afforded by Warton, no very high idea can

the Rhymer could have flourished; and to this Anglo-Norman Thomas, Gotfried might refer. Eichorn, the German editor, says, that Gotfried translated his romance from the Norman French. Mr. Scott, in his edition of Sir Tristrem, after conjecturing one date for the birth of Thomas the Rhymer, avowedly alters it for the sake of identifying the Rhymer with Gotfried's Thomas of Britannia, and places his birth before the end of the twelfth century. This, he allows, would extend the Rhymer's life to upwards of ninety years, a pretty fair age for the Scottish Tiresias; but if he survived 1296, as Harry the Minstrel informs us, he must have lived to beyond an hundred.

[1] His other works were the History of St. Alexius, from the Latin; Scripture Histories; and Fifteen Tokens before the Day of Judgment. The two last were paraphrases of Scripture. Mr. Ellis ultimately retracted his opinion, adopted from Warton, that he was the author of a romance entitled the Life of Alexander.

be formed of the genius of this poetical marshall. Warton anticipates the surprise of his reader, in finding the English language improve so slowly, when we reach the verses of Davie. The historian of our poetry had, in a former section, treated of Robert de Brunne as a writer anterior to Davie; but as the latter part of De Brunne's Chronicle was not finished till 1339, in the reign of Edward III., it would be surprising indeed, if the language should seem to improve when we go back to the reign of Edward II. Davie's work may be placed in our poetical chronology, posterior to the first part of De Brunne's Chronicle, but anterior to the latter.

Richard Rolle, another of our earliest versifiers, died in 1349. He was a hermit, and led a secluded life, near the nunnery of Hampole, in Yorkshire. Seventeen of his devotional pieces are enumerated in Ritson's "Bibliographia Poetica." The

penitential psalms and theological tracts of a hermit, were not likely to enrich or improve the style of our poetry; and they are accordingly confessed, by those who have read them, to be very dull. His name challenges notice, only from the paucity of contemporary writers.

Laurence Minot, although he is conjectured to have been a monk, had a Muse of a livelier temper, and for want of a better poet, he may, by courtesy, be called the Tyrtæus of his age. His few poems which have reached us are, in fact, short narrative ballads on the victories obtained in the reign of Edward III. beginning with that of Hallidown Hill, and ending with the Siege of Guisnes Castle. As his poem on the last of these events, was evidently written recently after the exploit, the era of his poetical career may be laid between the years 1332 and 1352. Minot's works lay in absolute oblivion till late in the last century, in a

MS. of the Cotton Collection, which was supposed to be a transcript of the works of Chaucer. The name of Richard Chawfir having been accidentally scrawled on a spare leaf of the MS. (probably the name of its ancient possessor), the framer of the Cotton catalogue, very goodnaturedly, converted it into Geoffrey Chaucer. By this circumstance Mr. Tyrwhitt, when seeking materials for his edition of the Canterbury Tales, accidentally discovered an English versifier older than Chaucer himself. The style of Minot's ten military ballads is frequently alliterative, and has much of the Northern dialect. He is an easy and lively versifier, though not, as Mr. G. Chalmers denominates him, either elegant or energetic.

In the course of the fourteenth century our language seems to have been inundated with metrical romances, until the public taste had been palled, by the

mediocrity and monotony of the greater part of them. At least, if Chaucer's host in the Canterbury Tales be a fair representation of contemporary opinion, they were held in no great reverence ; to judge by the comparison which the vintner applies to the "drafty rhymings" of Sir Topaz. The practice, of translating French metrical romances into English, did not, however, terminate in the fourteenth century. Nor must we form an indiscriminate estimate of the ancient metrical romances, either from Chaucer's implied contempt for them, nor from mine host of the Tabard's ungainly comparison with respect to one of them. The ridiculous style of Sir Topaz is not an image of them all. Some of them, far from being chargeable with impertinent and prolix description, are concise in narration, and paint with rapid, but distinct sketches, the battles, the banquets, and the rites of worship of chivalrous life.

Classical poetry has scarcely ever conveyed in shorter boundaries, so many interesting and complicated events, as may be found in the good old romance of Le Bone Florence[1]. Chaucer himself, when he strikes into the new, or allegorical, school of romance, has many passages more tedious, and less affecting, than the better parts of those simple old fablers. For in spite of their puerility in the excessive use of the marvellous, their simplicity is often touching, and they have many scenes that would form adequate subjects for the best historical pencils.

The reign of Edward III. was illustrious not for military achievements alone; it was a period when the English character displayed its first intellectual boldness. It is true that the history of the times presents a striking contrast between the light of intelligence which began to open on men's minds, and the

[1] Given in Ritson's Old Metrical Romances.

frightful evils which were still permitted to darken the face of society. In the scandalous avarice of the church, in the corruptions of the courts of judicature, and in the licentiousness of a nobility, who countenanced disorders and robbery, we trace the unbanished remains of barbarism; but, on the other hand, we may refer to this period, for the genuine commencement of our literature, for the earliest diffusion of free inquiry, and for the first great movement of the national mind towards emancipation from spiritual tyranny. The abuses of religion were, from their nature, the most powerfully calculated to arrest the public attention; and Poetry was not deficient in contributing its influence, to expose those abuses, both as subjects of ridicule and of serious indignation. Two poets of this period, with very different powers of genius, and probably addressing themselves to different classes of society, made the corruptions of the clergy the objects

of their satire—taking satire not in its mean and personal acceptation, but understanding it as the moral warfare of indignation and ridicule against turpitude and absurdity. Those writers were Langlande and Chaucer, both of whom have been claimed, as primitive reformers, by some of the zealous historians of the Reformation. At the idea of a full separation from the Catholic Church, both Langlande and Chaucer would possibly have been struck with horror. The doctrine of predestination, which was a leading tenet of the first protestants, is not, I believe, avowed in any of Chaucer's writings, and it is expressly reprobated by Langlande. It is, nevertheless, very likely that their works contributed to promote the Reformation. Langlande, especially, who was an earlier satirist and painter of manners than Chaucer, is undaunted in reprobating the corruptions of the papal government. He prays to Heaven to amend the Pope,

whom he charges with pillaging the Church, interfering unjustly with the King, and causing the blood of Christians to be wantonly shed; and it is a curious circumstance, that he predicts the existence of a king, who, in his vengeance, would destroy the monasteries.

The work entitled "Visions of William concerning Piers Plowman[1]," and concerning the origin, progress, and perfection of the Christian life, which is the earliest known original poem, of any extent, in the English language, is ascribed to Robert Langlande, a secular priest, born at Mortimer's Cleobury, in Shropshire, and educated at Oriel College, Oxford. That it was written by Langlande, I believe can be traced to no higher authority than that of Bale, or of the

[1] The work is commonly entitled the "Visions of Piers Plowman," but incorrectly, for Piers is not the dreamer who sees the visions, but one of the characters who is beheld, and who represents the Christian life.

printer Crawley; but his name may stand for that of its author, until a better claimant shall be found.

Those Visions, from their allusions to events evidently recent, can scarcely be supposed to have been finished later than the year 1362, almost thirty years before the appearance of the Canterbury Tales.

It is not easy, even after Dr. Whitaker's laborious analysis of this work, to give any concise account of its contents. The general object is to expose, in allegory, the existing abuses of society, and to inculcate the public and private duties both of the laity and clergy. An imaginary seer, afterwards described by the name of William, wandering among the bushes of the Malvern hills, is overtaken by sleep, and dreams that he beholds a magnificent tower, which turns out to be the tower or fortress of Truth, and a dungeon, which, we soon after learn, is the abode of Wrong. In a spacious plain in front

of it, the whole race of mankind are employed in their respective pursuits; such as husbandmen, merchants, minstrels with their audiences, begging friars, and itinerant venders of pardons, leading a dissolute life under the cloak of religion. The last of these are severely satirized. A transition is then made to the civil grievances of society; and the policy, not the duty, of submitting to bad princes, is illustrated by the parable of the Rats and Cats. In the second canto, true Religion descends, and demonstrates, with many precepts, how the conduct of individuals, and the general management of society, may be amended. In the third and fourth canto, Mede or Bribery is exhibited, seeking a marriage with Falsehood, and attempting to make her way to the courts of justice, where, it appears, that she has many friends, both among the civil judges and ecclesiastics. The poem, after this, becomes more and more desultory. The

author awakens more than once; but forgetting that he has told us so, continues to converse as freely as ever, with the moral phantasmagoria of his dream. A long train of allegorical personages, whom it would not be very amusing to enumerate, succeeds. In fact, notwithstanding Dr. Whitaker's discovery of a plan and unity in this work, I cannot help thinking with Warton, that it possesses neither; at least, if it has any design, it is the most vague and ill constructed that ever entered into the brain of a waking dreamer. The appearance of the visionary personages is often sufficiently whimsical. The power of Grace, for instance, confers upon Piers Plowman, or "Christian Life," four stout oxen, to cultivate the field of Truth; these are, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the last of whom is described as the gentlest of the team. She afterwards assigns him the like number of stots or bullocks, to harrow what

the evangelists had ploughed; and this new horned team consists of saint or stot Ambrose, stot Austin, stot Gregory, and stot Jerome.

The verse of Langlande is alliterative, without rhyme, and of triple time. In modern pronunciation it divides the ear between an anapæstic and dactylic cadence; though some of the verses are reducible to no perceptible metre. Mr. Mitford, in his Harmony of Languages, thinks that the more we accommodate the reading of it to ancient pronunciation, the more generally we shall find it run in an anapæstic measure. His style, even making allowance for its antiquity, has a vulgar air, and seems to indicate a mind that would have been coarse, though strong, in any state of society. But, on the other hand, his work, with all its tiresome homilies, illustrations from school divinity, and uncouth phraseology, has some interesting features of originality.

He employs no borrowed materials; he is the earliest of our writers in whom there is a tone of moral reflection, and his sentiments are those of bold and solid integrity. The zeal of truth was in him; and his vehement manner sometimes rises to eloquence, when he denounces hypocrisy and imposture. The mind is struck with his rude voice, proclaiming independent and popular sentiments, from an age of slavery and superstition, and thundering a prediction in the ear of papacy, which was doomed to be literally fulfilled at the distance of nearly two hundred years. His allusions to contemporary life afford some amusing glimpses of its manners. There is room to suspect that Spenser was acquainted with his works; and Milton, either from accident or design, has the appearance of having had one of Langlande's passages in his mind, when he wrote the sublime description of the lazar-house, in Paradise Lost.

Chaucer was probably known and distinguished as a poet anterior to the appearance of Langlande's Visions. Indeed, if he had produced nothing else than his youthful poem, "the Court of Love," it was sufficient to indicate one destined to harmonise and refine the national strains. But it is likely, that before his thirty-fourth year, about which time Langlande's Visions may be supposed to have been finished, Chaucer had given several compositions to the public.

The simple old narrative romance had become too familiar in Chaucer's time, to invite him to its beaten track. The poverty of his native tongue obliged him to look round for subsidiary materials to his fancy, both in the Latin language, and in some modern foreign source that should not appear to be trite and exhausted. His age was, unfortunately, little conversant with the best Latin classics. Ovid, Claudian, and Statius,

were the chief favourites in poetry, and Boethius in prose. The allegorical style of the last of those authors, seems to have given an early bias to the taste of Chaucer. In modern poetry, his first, and long continued, predilection was attracted by the new and allegorical style of romance, which had sprung up, in France, in the thirteenth century, under William de Lorris. We find him, accordingly, during a great part of his poetical career, engaged among the dreams, emblems, flower-worshippings, and amatory parliaments, of that visionary school. This, we may say, was a gymnasium of rather too light and playful exercise for so strong a genius; and it must be owned, that his allegorical poetry is often puerile and prolix. Yet, even in this walk of fiction, we never entirely lose sight of that peculiar grace, and gaiety, which distinguish the Muse of Chaucer; and no one who remembers his productions of the House of Fame,

and the Flower and the Leaf, will regret that he sported, for a season, in the field of allegory. Even his pieces of this description, the most fantastic in design, and tedious in execution, are generally interspersed with fresh and joyous descriptions of external nature.

In this new species of romance, we perceive the youthful Muse of the language, in love with mystical meanings and forms of fancy, more remote, if possible, from reality, than those of the chivalrous fable itself; and we could, sometimes, wish her back from her emblematic castles, to the more solid ones of the elder fable; but still she moves in pursuit of those shadows with an impulse of novelty, and an exuberance of spirit, that is not wholly without its attraction and delight.

Chaucer was, afterwards, happily drawn to the more natural style of Boccaccio, and from him he derived the hint of a

subject, in which, besides his own original portraits of contemporary life, he could introduce stories of every description, from the most heroic to the most familiar.

Gower, though he had been earlier distinguished in French poetry, began later than Chaucer, to cultivate his native tongue. His "*Confessio Amantis*," the only work by which he is known as an English poet, did not appear till the sixteenth year of Richard II. He must have been a highly accomplished man, for his time, and imbued with a studious and mild spirit of reflection. His French sonnets are marked by elegance and sensibility, and his English poetry contains a digest of all that constituted the knowledge of his age. His contemporaries greatly esteemed him; and the Scottish, as well as English writers of the subsequent period, speak of him with unqualified admiration. But though the placid

and moral Gower might be a civilizing spirit among his contemporaries, his character has none of the bold originality which stamps an influence on the literature of a country. He was not, like Chaucer, a patriarch in the family of genius, the scattered traits of whose resemblance may be seen in such descendants as Shakespeare and Spenser. The design of his Confessio Amantis is peculiarly ill contrived. A lover, whose case has not a particle of interest, applies, according to the Catholic ritual, to a confessor, who, at the same time, whimsically enough, bears the additional character of a Pagan priest of Venus. The holy father, it is true, speaks like a good Christian, and communicates more scandal about the intrigues of Venus, than Pagan author ever told. A pretext is afforded by the ceremony of confession, for the priest not only to initiate his pupil in the duties of a lover, but in a wide

range of ethical and physical knowledge; and at the mention of every virtue and vice, a tale is introduced by way of illustration. Does the confessor wish to warn the lover against impertinent curiosity? he introduces, apropos to that failing, the history of Actæon, of peeping memory. The confessor inquires if he is addicted to a vain-glorious disposition; because if he is, he can tell him a story about Nebuchadnezzar. Does he wish to hear of the virtue of conjugal patience? it is aptly inculcated by the anecdote respecting Socrates, who, when he received the contents of Xantippe's pail upon his head, replied to the provocation with only a witticism. Thus, with shrieving, narrations, and didactic speeches, the work is extended to thirty thousand lines, in the course of which, the virtues and vices are all regularly allegorized. But in allegory Gower is cold and uninventive, and enumerates qualities, when he should

conjure up visible objects. On the whole, though copiously stored with facts and fables, he is unable either to make truth appear poetical, or to render fiction the graceful vehicle of truth.

PART II.

PART II.

Fifteenth century.

WARTON, with great beauty and justice, compares the appearance of Chaucer in our language, to a premature day in an English spring; after which the gloom of winter returns, and the buds and blossoms, which have been called forth by a transient sunshine, are nipped by frosts and scattered by storms. The causes of the relapse of our poetry, after Chaucer, seem but too apparent in the annals of English history, which during five reigns of the fifteenth century continue to display but a tissue of conspiracies, proscriptions, and bloodshed. Inferior even to France in literary progress, England displays in the fifteenth century

a still more mortifying contrast with Italy. Italy too had her religious schisms and public distractions; but her arts and literature had always a sheltering place. They were even cherished by the rivalship of independent communities, and received encouragement from the opposite sources of commercial and ecclesiastical wealth. But *we* had no Nicholas the Fifth, nor house of Medicis. In England, the evils of civil war agitated society as one mass. There was no refuge from them—no inclosure to fence in the field of improvement—no mound to stem the torrent of public troubles. Before the death of Henry VI. it is said that one half of the nobility and gentry in the kingdom had perished in the field, or on the scaffold. Whilst in England the public spirit was thus brutalized, whilst the value and security of life were abridged, whilst the wealth of the rich was employed only in war, and the chance

of patronage taken from the scholar; in Italy, princes and magistrates vied with each other in calling men of genius around them, as the brightest ornaments of their states and courts. The art of printing came to Italy to record the treasures of its literary attainments; but when it came to England, with a very few exceptions, it could not be said, for the purpose of diffusing native literature, to be a necessary art. A circumstance, additionally hostile to the national genius, may certainly be traced in the executions for religion, which sprung up as a horrible novelty in our country in the fifteenth century. The clergy were determined to indemnify themselves for the exposures which they had met with in the preceding age, and the unhallowed compromise which Henry IV. made with them, in return for supporting his accession, armed them, in an evil hour, with the torch of persecution. In one

point of improvement, namely, in the boldness of religious inquiry, the North of Europe might already boast of being superior to the South, with all its learning, wealth, and elegant acquirements. The Scriptures had been opened by Wickliff, but they were again to become "a fountain sealed, and a spring shut up." Amidst the progress of letters in Italy, the fine arts threw enchantment around superstition; and the warm imagination of the South was congenial with the nature of catholic institutions. But the English mind had already shewn, even amidst its comparative barbarism, a stern independent spirit of religion; and from this single proud and elevated point of its character, it was now to be crushed and beaten down. Sometimes a baffled struggle against oppression is more depressing to the human faculties than continued submission.

Our natural hatred of tyranny, and we

may safely add, the general test of history and experience, would dispose us to believe religious persecution to be necessarily and essentially baneful to the elegant arts, no less than to the intellectual pursuits of mankind. It is natural to think, that when punishments are let loose upon men's opinions, they will spread a contagious alarm from the understanding to the imagination. They will make the heart grow close and insensible to generous feelings, where it is unaccustomed to express them freely; and the graces and gaiety of fancy will be dejected and appalled. In an age of persecution, even the living study of his own species must be comparatively darkened to the poet. He looks round on the characters and countenances of his fellow-creatures, and instead of the naturally cheerful and eccentric variety of their humours, he reads only a sullen and

oppressed uniformity. To the spirit of poetry we should conceive such a period to be an impassable Avernus, where she would drop her wings and expire. Undoubtedly this inference will be found warranted by a general survey of the history of Genius. It is, at the same time, impossible to deny, that wit and poetry have in some instances flourished coeval with ferocious bigotry, on the same spot, and under the same government. The literary glory of Spain was posterior to the establishment of the Inquisition. The fancy of Cervantes sported in its neighbourhood, though he declared that he could have made his writings still more entertaining, if he had not dreaded the holy office. But the growth of Spanish genius, in spite of the co-existence of religious tyranny, was fostered by uncommon and glorious advantages in the circumstances of the

nation. Spain (for we are comparing Spain in the sixteenth with England in the fifteenth century) was, at the period alluded to, great and proud in an empire, on which it was boasted that the sun never set. Her language was widely diffused. The wealth of America for a while animated all her arts. Robertson says, that the Spaniards discovered at that time an extent of political knowledge, which the English themselves did not attain for more than a century afterwards. Religious persecutions began in England, at a time when she was comparatively poor and barbarous; yet after she had been awakened to so much intelligence on the subject of religion, as to make one half of the people indignantly impatient of priestly tyranny. If we add, to the political troubles of the age, the circumstance of religious opinions being silenced and stifled by penal horrors, it

will seem more wonderful that the spark of literature was kept alive, than that it did not spread more widely. Yet the fifteenth century had its redeeming traits of refinement, the more wonderful for appearing in the midst of such unfavourable circumstances. It had a Fortescue, although he wandered in exile, unprotected by the constitution which he explained and extolled in his writings. It had a noble patron and lover of letters in Tiptoft[1], although he died by the hands of the executioner. It witnessed the founding of many colleges, in both of the universities, although they were still the haunts of scholastic quibbling; and it produced, in the venerable Pecock, one conscientious dignitary of the church, who wished to have converted the protestants by appeals to reason, though for

[1] Earl of Worcester.

so doing he had his books, and, if he had not recanted in good time, would have had his body also, committed to the flames. To these causes may be ascribed the backwardness of our poetry between the dates of Chaucer and Spenser. I speak of the chasm extending to, or nearly to Spenser; for, without undervaluing the elegant talents of Lord Surrey, I think we cannot consider the national genius as completely emancipated from oppressive circumstances, till the time of Elizabeth. There was indeed a commencement of our poetry under Henry VIII. It was a fine, but a feeble one. English genius seems then to have come forth, but half assured that her day of emancipation was at hand. There is something melancholy even in Lord Surrey's strains of gallantry. The succession of Henry VIII. gave stability to the government, and some degree of magnificence to the state

of society. But tyranny was not yet at an end; and to judge, not by the gross buffoons, but by the few minds entitled to be called poetical, which appear in the earlier part of the sixteenth century, we may say that the English Muse had still a diffident aspect and a faltering tone.

There is a species of talent, however, which may continue to endite what is called poetry, without having its sensibilities deeply affected by the circumstances of society; and of luminaries of this description our fifteenth century was not destitute. Ritson has enumerated about seventy of them[1]. Of these, Occleve and Lydgate were the nearest successors to Chaucer. Occleve speaks of himself as Chaucer's scholar. He has, at least, the merit of expressing the sincerest enthusiasm for his master. But it is difficult to controvert the character,

[1] In his Bibliographia Poetica, vol. i.

which has been generally assigned to him, that of a flat and feeble writer. Excepting the adoption of his story of Fortunatus, by William Browne, in his pastorals, and the modern re-publication of a few of his pieces, I know not of any public compliment which has ever been paid to his poetical memory.

Lydgate is altogether the most respectable versifier of the sixteenth century. A list of 250 of the productions ascribed to him (which is given in Ritson's Bibliographia Poetica) attests, at least, the fluency of his pen; and he seems to have ranged with the same facility through the gravest and the lightest subjects of composition. Ballads, hymns, ludicrous stories, legends, romances, and allegories, were equally at his command. Verbose and diffuse as Dan John of Bury must be allowed to have been, he is not without occasional touches of pathos. The poet Gray was the first in modern times who

did him the justice to observe them[1]. His "Fall of Princes" may also deserve notice, in tracing back the thread of our national poetry, as it is more likely than

[1] Vide vol. I. p. 59, of these Selections. He translated largely from the French and Latin. His principal poems are "The Fall of Princes," "The Siege of Thebes," and "The Destruction of Troy." The first of these is from Laurent's French version of Boccaccio's book "de Casibus virorum et feminarum illustrium." His "Siege of Thebes," which was intended as an additional Canterbury Tale, and in the introduction to which he feigns himself in company with "the host of the Tabard and the Pilgrims," is compiled from Guido Colonna, Statius, and Seneca. His "Destruction of Troy" is from the work of Guido Colonna, or from a French translation of it. His "London Lickpenny" is curious, for the minute picture of the metropolis, which it exhibits, in the fifteenth century. A specimen of Lydgate's humour may be seen in his tale of "The Prioress and her three Lovers," which Mr. Jamieson has given in his "Collection of Ballads." I had transcribed it from a manuscript in the British Museum, thinking that it was not in print, but found that Mr. Jamieson had anticipated me.

any other English production, to have suggested to Lord Sackville the idea of his "Mirror for Magistrates." The Mirror for Magistrates again gave hints to Spenser in allegory, and may, also, have possibly suggested to Shakespeare the idea of his historical plays.

I know not if Hardynge, who belonged to the reign of Edward IV., be worth mentioning, as one of the obscure luminaries of this benighted age. He left a Chronicle of the History of England, which possesses an incidental interest from his having been himself a witness to some of the scenes which he records; for he lived in the family of the Percys, and fought under the banners of Hotspur; but from the style of his versified Chronicle, his head would appear to have been much better furnished for sustaining the blows of the battle, than for contriving its poetical celebration.

End of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century.

The Scottish poets of the fifteenth, and of a part of the sixteenth century, would also justly demand a place, in any history of our poetry, that meant to be copious and minute; as the northern "makers," notwithstanding the difference of dialect, generally denominate their language "Inglis." Scotland produced an entire poetical version of the Æneid, before Lord Surrey had translated a single book of it; indeed before there was an English version of any classic, excepting Boëthius, if he can be called a classic. Virgil was only known in the English language through a romance on the Siege of Troy, published by Caxton, which, as Bishop Douglas observes, in the prologue to his Scottish Æneid, is no more like Virgil, than the devil is like St. Austin. Perhaps the resemblance may not even be so great. But the Scottish poets, after all that has been said of them, form nothing like

a brilliant revival of poetry. They are on the whole superior, indeed, in spirit and originality to their English cotemporaries, which is not saying much; but their style is, for the most part, cast, if possible, in a worse taste. The prevailing fault of English diction, in the fifteenth century, is redundant ornament, and an affectation of anglicising Latin words. In this pedantry and use of "*aureate terms*," the Scottish versifiers went even beyond their brethren of the south. Some exceptions to the remark, I am aware, may be found in Dunbar, who sometimes exhibits simplicity and lyrical terseness; but even *his* style has frequent deformities of quaintness, false ornament, and alliteration. The rest of them, when they meant to be most eloquent, tore up words from the Latin, which never took root in the language, like children making a mock garden with flowers and

branches stuck in the ground, which speedily wither.

From Lydgate down to Wyatt and Surrey, there seem to be no southern writers deserving attention, unless for the purposes of the antiquary, excepting Hawes, Barclay, and Skelton, and even their names might perhaps be omitted, without treason to the cause of taste[1].

Stephen Hawes, who was groom of the chamber to Henry VII., is said to have been accomplished in the literature of France and Italy, and to have travelled into those countries. His most import-

[1] To the reign of Henry VI. belongs Henry Lonelich, who plied the unpoetical trade of a skinner, and who translated the French romance of St. Graal; Thomas Chestre made a free and enlarged version of the Lai de Lanval, of the French poetess Marie; and Robert Thornton, who versified the "Morte Arthur" in the alliterative measure of Langlande.

ant production is the "Pastyme of Pleasure[1]," an allegorical romance, the hero of which is Grandamour, or Gallantry, and the heroine La Belle Pucelle, or Perfect Beauty. In this work the personified characters have all the capriciousness, and vague moral meaning, of the old French allegorical romance; but the puerility of the school remains, while the zest of its novelty is gone. There is also in his foolish personage of Godfrey Gobelive, something of the burlesque of the worst taste of Italian poetry. It is certainly very tiresome to follow Hawes's hero, Grandamour, through all his adventures, studying grammar, rhetoric, and arithmetic, in the tower of Doctrine; afterwards slaughtering giants, who have each two or three emblematic heads; sacrificing to heathen gods, then marry-

[1] He also wrote the "Temple of Glass," the substance of which is taken from Chaucer's "House of Fame."

ing according to the catholic rites; and finally, relating his own death and burial, to which he is so obliging as to add his epitaph. Yet, as the story seems to be of Hawes's invention, it ranks him above the mere chroniclers and translators of the age. Warton praises him for improving on the style of Lydgate. His language may be somewhat more modern, but in vigour or harmony, I am at a loss to perceive in it any superiority. The indulgent historian of our poetry has, however, quoted one fine line from him, describing the fiery breath of a dragon, which guarded the island of beauty.

"The fire was great; it made the island light."

Every romantic poem in his own language is likely to have interested Spenser, and if there were many such glimpses of magnificence in Hawes, we might suppose the author of the "Fairy Queen" to have cherished his youthful genius by

contemplating them; but his beauties are too few and faint to have afforded any inspiring example to Spenser.

Alexander Barclay was a priest of St. Mary Otterburne, in Devonshire, and died at a great age at Croydon, in the year 1532. His principal work was a free translation of Sebastian Brandt's[1] "Navis Stultifera," enlarged with some satirical strictures of his own upon the manners of his English cotemporaries. His "Ship of Fools" has been as often quoted as most obsolete English poems; but if it were not obsolete it would not be quoted. He also wrote Eclogues, which are curious as the earliest pieces of that kind in our language. From their title we might be led to expect some interesting delineations of English rural customs at that period. But Barclay intended to be a moralist, and not a painter of nature; and the chief, though insipid,

[1] Sebastian Brandt was a civilian of Basil.

moral which he inculcates is, that it is better to be a clown than a courtier[1]. The few scenes of country life which he exhibits for that purpose are singularly ill fitted to illustrate his doctrine, and present rustic existence under a miserable aspect, more resembling the caricature of Scotland in Churchill's "Prophecy of Famine," than any thing which we can imagine to have ever been the general

[1] Barclay gives some sketches of manners; but they are those of the town, not the country. Warton is partial to his black letter eclogues, because they contain allusions to the customs of the age. They certainly inform us at what hour our ancestors usually dined, supped, and went to bed; that they were fond of good eating, and that it was advisable, in the poet's opinion, for any one who attempted to help himself to a favourite dish at their banquets to wear a gauntlet of mail. Quin the player, who probably never had heard of Barclay, delivered at a much later period a similar observation on city feasts; namely, that the candidate for a good dish of turtle ought never to be without a basket-hilted knife and fork.

condition of English peasants. The speakers, in one of his eclogues, lie littered among straw, for want of a fire to keep themselves warm; and one of them expresses a wish that the milk for dinner may be curdled, to save them the consumption of bread. As the writer's object was not to make us pity but esteem the rustic lot, this picture of English poverty can only be accounted for by supposing it to have been drawn from partial observation, or the result of a bad taste, that naturally delighted in squalid subjects of description. Barclay, indeed, though he has some stanzas which might be quoted for their strength of thought and felicity of expression, is, upon the whole, the least ambitious of all writers to adorn his conceptions of familiar life with either dignity or beauty. An amusing instance of this occurs in one of his moral apologues: Adam, he tells us in verse, was one day abroad at his work—

Eve was at the door of the house, with her children playing about her; some of them she was "kembing," says the poet, prefixing another participle not of the most delicate kind, to describe the usefulness of the comb. Her Maker having deigned to pay her a visit, she was ashamed to be found with so many ill-drest children about her, and hastened to stow a number of them out of sight; some of them she concealed under hay and straw, others she put up the chimney, and one or two into a "tub of draff." Having produced, however, the best looking and best dressed of them, she was delighted to hear their Divine Visitor bless them, and destine some of them to be kings and emperors, some dukes and barons, and others sheriffs, mayors, and aldermen. Unwilling that any of her family should forfeit blessings whilst they were going, she immediately drew out the remainder from their concealment;

but when they came forth, they were so covered with dust and cobwebs, and had so many bits of chaff and straw sticking to their hair, that instead of receiving benedictions and promotion, they were doomed to vocations of toil and poverty, suitable to their dirty appearance.

John Skelton, who was the rival and contemporary of Barclay, was laureate to the university of Oxford, and tutor to the Prince, afterwards Henry VIII. Erasmus must have been a bad judge of English poetry, or must have alluded only to the learning of Skelton, when in one of his letters he pronounces him "Britannicarum literarum lumen et decus." There is certainly a vehemence and vivacity in Skelton, which was worthy of being guided by a better taste; and the objects of his satire bespeak some degree of public spirit[1]. But his ec-

[1] He was the determined enemy of the mendicant friars and of Cardinal Wolsey. The courtiers of

centricity in attempts at humour is at once vulgar and flippant, and his style is

Henry VIII. whilst obliged to flatter a minister whom they detested, could not but be gratified with Skelton's boldness in singly daring to attack him. In his picture of Wolsey at the Council Board, he thus describes the imperious minister:

> "Then in the chamber of stars
> "All matters there he mars;
> "Clapping his rod on the board,
> "No man dare speak a word;
> "For he hath all the saying,
> "Without any renaying.
> "He rolleth in his recòrds,
> "He sayeth, how say ye, my lords,
> "Is not my reason good?
> "Good even, good Robin Hood.
> "Some say yes, and some
> "Sit still, as they were dumb."

These lines are a remarkable anticipation[1] of the very words in the fifteenth article of the charges preferred against Wolsey by the Parliament of 1529. "That the said Lord Cardinal, sitting among the Lords and other of your Majesty's most honourable

[1] Neve's Cursory Remarks on the English Poets.

almost a texture of slang phrases, patched with shreds of French and Latin. We are told, indeed, in a periodical work of the present day, that his manner is to be excused, because it was assumed for "the nonce," and was suited to the taste of his contemporaries. But it is surely a poor apology for the satirist of any age, to say that he stooped to humour its vilest taste, and could not ridicule vice and folly without degrading himself to buffoonery.

Council, used himself so, that if any man would shew his mind according to his duty, he would so take him up with his accustomable words, that they were better to hold their peace than to speak, so that he would hear no more speak, but one or two great personages, so that he would have all the words himself, and consumed much time without a fair tale." His ridicule drew down the wrath of Wolsey, who ordered him to be apprehended. But Skelton fled to the sanctuary of Westminster Abbey, where he was protected; and died in the same year in which Wolsey's prosecutors drew up the article of impeachment, so similar to the satire of the poet.

Upon the whole, we might regard the poetical feeling and genius of England as almost extinct at the end of the fifteenth century, if the beautiful ballad of the "Nut-brown Maid" were not to be referred to that period[1]. It is said to have been translated from the German; but even considered as a translation, it meets us as a surprising flower amidst the winter-solstice of our poetry.

Sixteenth century.

The literary character of England was not established till near the end of the sixteenth century. At the beginning of that century, immediately anterior to Lord Surrey, we find Barclay and Skelton popular candidates for the foremost honours of English poetry. They are but poor names. Yet slowly as the improvement of our poetry seems to proceed in the early part of the sixteenth century, the circumstances which subsequently fostered

[1] Warton places it about the year 1500.

the national genius to its maturity and magnitude, begin to be distinctly visible even before the year 1500. The accession of Henry VII., by fixing the monarchy and the prospect of its regular succession, forms a great era of commencing civilization. The art of printing, which had been introduced in a former period of discord, promised to diffuse its light in a steadier and calmer atmosphere. The great discoveries of navigation, by quickening the intercourse of European nations, extended their influence to England. In the short portion of the fifteenth century, during which printing was known in this country, the press exhibits our literature at a lower ebb than even that of France; but before that century was concluded, the tide of classical learning had fairly set in. England had received Erasmus, and had produced Sir Thomas More. The English poetry of the last of these great men is

indeed of trifling consequence, in comparison with the general impulse which his other writings must have given to the age in which he lived. But every thing that excites the dormant intellect of a nation, must be regarded as contributing to its future poetry. It is possible, that in thus adverting to the diffusion of knowledge (especially classical knowledge) which preceded our golden age of originality, we may be challenged by the question, how much the greatest of all our poets was indebted to learning. We are apt to compare such geniuses as Shakespeare to comets in the moral universe, which baffle all calculations as to the causes which accelerate or retard their appearance, or from which we can predict their return. But those phenomena of poetical inspiration are, in fact, still dependant on the laws and light of the system which they visit. Poets may be indebted to the learning and philosophy of their age,

without being themselves men of erudition or philosophers. When the fine spirit of truth has gone abroad, it passes insensibly from mind to mind, independent of its direct transmission from books; and it comes home in a more welcome shape to the poet, when caught from his social intercourse with his species, than from solitary study. Shakespeare's genius was certainly indebted to the intelligence and moral principles which existed in his age, and to that intelligence and to those moral principles, the revival of classical literature undoubtedly contributed. So also did the revival of pulpit eloquence, and the restoration of the Scriptures to the people in their native tongue. The dethronement of scholastic philosophy, and of the supposed infallibility of Aristotle's authority, an authority at one time almost paramount to that of the Scriptures themselves, was another good connected with the Reformation;

for though the logic of Aristotle long continued to be formally taught, scholastic theology was no longer sheltered beneath his name. Bible divinity superseded the glosses of the schoolmen, and the writings of Duns Scotus were consigned at Oxford to proclaimed contempt[1]. The reign of true philosophy

[1] Namely in the year 1535. The decline of Aristotle's authority, and that of scholastic divinity, though to a certain degree connected, are not, however, to be identified. What were called the doctrines of Aristotle by the schoolmen, were a mass of metaphysics established in his name, first by Arabic commentators, and afterwards by Catholic doctors; among the latter of whom, many expounded the philosophy of the Stagyrite, without understanding a word of the original language in which his doctrines were written. Some Platonic opinions had also mixed with the metaphysics of the schoolmen. Aristotle was nevertheless their main authority; though it is probable that, if he had come to life, he would not have fathered much of the philosophy which rested on his name. Some of the reformers threw off scholastic divinity and Aristotle's authority

was not indeed arrived, and the Reformation itself produced events tending to retard that progress of literature and intelligence, which had sprung up under its first auspices. Still, with partial interruptions, the culture of classical literature proceeded in the sixteenth century, and, amidst that culture, it is difficult to conceive that a system of Greek philosophy more poetical than Aristotle's, was without its influence on the English spirit—namely, that of Plato. That England possessed a distinct school of Platonic philosophy in the sixteenth century, can-

at once; but others, while they abjured the schoolmen, adhered to the Peripatetic system. In fact, until the revival of letters, Aristotle could not be said, with regard to the modern world, to be either fully known by his own works, or fairly tried by his own merits. Though ultimately overthrown by Bacon, his writings and his name, in the age immediately preceding Bacon, had ceased to be a mere stalking-horse to the schoolmen, and he was found to contain heresies which the Catholic metaphysicians had little suspected.

not, I believe, be affirmed[1], but we hear of the Platonic studies of Sir Philip Sydney; and traits of Platonism are sometimes beautifully visible in the poetry of Surrey and of Spenser[2]. The Italian Muse communicated a tinge of that spirit to our poetry, which must have been

[1] Enfield mentions no English school of Platonism before the time of Gale and Cudworth.

[2] In one of Spenser's hymns on Love and Beauty, he breathes this platonic doctrine.

"——— Every spirit, as it is most pure
"And hath in it the more of heavenly light,
"So it the fairer body doth procure
"To habit in, and it more fairly dight
"With cheerful grace and amiable sight;
"For of the soul the body form doth take,
"For soul is form, and doth the body make."

So, also, Surrey to his fair Geraldine.

"The golden gift that Nature did thee give,
"To faster friends, and feed them at thy will
"With form and favour, taught me to believe
"How thou art *made to shew her greatest skill.*"

This last thought was probably suggested by the

farther excited in the minds of poetical scholars by the influence of Grecian literature. Hurd indeed observes, that the Platonic doctrines had a deep influence on the sentiments and character of Spenser's age. They certainly form a very poetical creed of philosophy. The Aristotelian system was a vast mechanical labyrinth, which the human faculties were chilled, fatigued, and darkened by exploring. Plato at least expands the imagination, for he was a great poet; and if he had put in practice the law respecting poets which he prescribed to his ideal republic, he must have begun by banishing himself.

The Reformation, though ultimately

lines in Petrarch, which express a doctrine of the Platonic school, respecting the idea or origin of beauty.

"In qual parte del ciel', in quale idea
"Era l'esempio onde Natura tolse
"Quel bel viso leggiadro, in che ella volse
"Mostrar quaggiù, quantò lassì potea."

beneficial to literature, like all abrupt changes in society, brought its evil with its good. Its establishment under Edward VI. made the English too fanatical and polemical to attend to the finer objects of taste. Its commencement under Henry VIII., however promising at first, was too soon rendered frightful, by bearing the stamp of a tyrant's character, who, instead of opening the temple of religious peace, established a Janus-faced persecution against both the old and new opinions. On the other hand, Henry's power, opulence, and ostentation, gave some encouragement to the arts. He himself, monster as he was, affected to be a poet. His masques and pageants assembled the beauty and nobility of the land, and prompted a gallant spirit of courtesy. The cultivation of musical talents among his courtiers fostered our early lyrical poetry. Our intercourse with Italy was renewed from more en-

lightened motives than superstition, and under the influence of Lord Surrey, Italian poetry became once more, as it had been in the days of Chaucer, a source of refinement and regeneration to our own. I am not indeed disposed to consider the influence of Lord Surrey's works upon our language in the very extensive and important light in which it is viewed by Dr. Nott. I am doubtful if that learned editor has converted many readers to his opinion, that Lord Surrey was the first who gave us metrical instead of rhythmical versification; for, with just allowance for ancient pronunciation, the heroic measure of Chaucer will be found in general not only to be metrically correct, but to possess considerable harmony. Surrey was not the inventor of our metrical versification; nor had his genius the potent voice and the magic spell which rouse all the dormant energies of a language. In certain walks of com-

position, though not in the highest, viz. in the ode, elegy, and epitaph, he set a chaste and delicate example; but he was cut off too early in life, and cultivated poetry too slightly, to carry the pure stream of his style into the broad and bold channels of inventive fiction. Much undoubtedly he did, in giving sweetness to our numbers and in substituting for the rude tautology of a former age, a style of soft and brilliant ornament, of selected expression, and of verbal arrangement, which often winds into graceful novelties; though sometimes a little objectionable from its involution. Our language was also indebted to him for the introduction of blank verse. It may be noticed at the same time that blank verse, if it had continued to be written as Surrey wrote it, would have had a cadence too uniform and cautious to be a happy vehicle for the dramatic expression of the passions. Grimoald, the

second poet who used it after Lord Surrey, gave it a little more variety of pauses; but it was not till it had been tried as a measure by several composers, that it acquired a bold and flexible modulation.

The genius of Sir Thomas Wyatt was refined and elevated like that of his noble friend and contemporary; but his poetry is more sententious and sombrous, and in his lyrical effusions he studied terseness rather than suavity. Besides these two interesting men, Sir Francis Bryan the friend of Wyatt, George Viscount Rochford the brother of Anna Boleyne, and Thomas Lord Vaux, were poetical courtiers of Henry VIII. To the second of these Ritson assigns, though but by conjecture, one of the most beautiful and plaintive strains of our elder poetry, "O Death, rock me on sleep." In Totell's Collection, the earliest poetical miscellany in our language, two pieces are ascribed to the

same nobleman, the one entitled "The Assault of Love," the other beginning, "I loath that I did love," which have been frequently reprinted in modern times.

A poem of uncommon merit in the same collection, which is entitled "The restless state of a Lover," and which commences with these lines,

"The sun when he hath spread his rays,
"And shew'd his face ten thousand ways,"

has been ascribed by Dr. Nott to Lord Surrey, but not on decisive evidence.

In the reign of Edward VI. the effects of the Reformation became visible in our poetry, by blending religious with poetical enthusiasm, or rather by substituting the one for the other. The national Muse became puritanical, and was not improved by the change. Then flourished Sternhold and Hopkins, who, with the best intentions and the worst taste, de-

graded the spirit of Hebrew psalmody by flat and homely phraseology; and mistaking vulgarity for simplicity, turned into bathos what they found sublime. Such was the love of versifying holy writ at that period, that the Acts of the Apostles were rhymed, and set to music by Christopher Tye[1].

[1] To the reign of Edward VI. and Mary may be referred two or three contributors to the "Paradise of Dainty Devices," who, though their lives extended into the reign of Elizabeth, may exemplify the state of poetical language before her accession. Among these may be placed Edwards, author of the pleasing little piece, "Amantium iræ amoris redintegratio," and Hunnis, author of the following song.

"When first mine eyes did view and mark
"Thy beauty fair for to behold,
"And when mine ears 'gan first to hark
"The pleasant words that thou me told,
"I would as then I had been free,
"From ears to hear, and eyes to see.

"And when in mind I did consent
"To follow thus my fancy's will,

Lord Sackville's name is the next of any importance in our poetry that occurs after Lord Surrey's. The opinion of Sir Egerton Brydges with respect to the date of the first appearance of Lord Sackville's "Induction to the Mirror for Magistrates," would place that production, in strictness of chronology, at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. As an edition of the "Mirror," however, appeared in 1559, supposing Lord Sackville not to have assisted in that edition, the first shape of

"And when my heart did first relent
"To taste such bait myself to spill,
"I would my heart had been as thine,
"Or else thy heart as soft as mine.

"O flatterer false! thou traitor born,
"What mischief more might thou devise
"Than thy dear friend to have in scorn,
"And him to wound in sundry wise;
"Which still a friend pretends to be,
"And art not so by proof I see?
"Fie, fie upon such treachery."

the work must have been cast and composed in the reign of Mary. From the date of Lord Sackville's birth it is also apparent, that although he flourished under Elizabeth, and lived even to direct the councils of James, his prime of life must have been spent and his poetical character formed in the most disastrous period of the sixteenth century, a period when we may suppose the cloud that was passing over the public mind to have cast a gloom on the complexion of its literary taste. During five years of his life, from twenty-five to thirty, the time when sensibility and reflection meet most strongly, Lord Sackville witnessed the horrors of Queen Mary's reign, and I conceive that it is not fanciful to trace in his poetry the tone of an unhappy age. His plan for "The Mirror of Magistrates," is a mass of darkness and despondency. He proposed to make the figure of Sorrow introduce us in Hell to every unfortunate

great character of English history. The poet, like Dante, takes us to the gates of Hell; but he does not, like the Italian poet, bring us back again. It is true that those doleful legends were long continued, during a brighter period; but this was only done by an inferior order of poets, and was owing to their admiration of Sackville. Dismal as his allegories may be, his genius certainly displays in them considerable power. But better times were at hand. In the reign of Elizabeth, the English mind put forth its energies in every direction, exalted by a purer religion, and enlarged by new views of truth. This was an age of loyalty, adventure, and generous emulation. The chivalrous character was softened by intellectual pursuits, while the genius of chivalry itself still lingered, as if unwilling to depart, and paid his last homage to a warlike and female reign. A degree of romantic fancy remained in the manners and superstitions of the people; and alle-

gory might be said to parade the streets in their public pageants and festivities. Quaint and pedantic as those allegorical exhibitions might often be, they were nevertheless more expressive of erudition, ingenuity, and moral meaning, than they had been in former times. The philosophy of the highest minds still partook of a visionary character. A poetical spirit infused itself into the practical heroism of the age; and some of the worthies of that period seem less like ordinary men, than like beings called forth out of fiction, and arrayed in the brightness of her dreams. They had "High thoughts seated in a heart of courtesy[1]." The life of Sir Philip Sydney was poetry put into action.

The result of activity and curiosity in the public mind was to complete the revival of classical literature, to increase the importation of foreign books, and to

[1] An expression used by Sir P. Sydney.

multiply translations, from which poetry supplied herself with abundant subjects and materials, and in the use of which she shewed a frank and fearless energy, that criticism and satire had not yet acquired power to overawe. Romance came back to us from the southern languages, clothed in new luxury by the warm imagination of the south. The growth of poetry under such circumstances might indeed be expected to be as irregular as it was profuse. The field was open to daring absurdity, as well as to genuine inspiration; and accordingly there is no period in which the extremes of good and bad writing are so abundant. Stanihurst, for instance, carried the violence of nonsense to a pitch of which there is no preceding example. Even late in the reign of Elizabeth, Gabriel Harvey was aided and abetted by several men of genius, in his conspiracy to subvert the versification of the language;

and Lylly gained over the court, for a time, to employ his corrupt jargon called Euphuism. Even Puttenham, a grave and candid critic, leaves an indication of crude and puerile taste, when, in a laborious treatise on poetry, he directs the composer how to make verses beautiful to the eye, by writing them "in the shapes of eggs, turbots, fuzees, and lozenges."

Among the numerous poets belonging exclusively to Elizabeth's reign[1], Spenser stands without a class and without a rival. To proceed from the poets already mentioned to Spenser, is certainly to pass over a considerable number of years, which are important, especially from their including the dates of those early attempts in the regular drama, which preceded the appearance of Shakespeare[2].

[1] Of Shakespeare's career a part only belongs to Elizabeth's reign, and of Jonson's a still smaller.

[2] The tragedy of Gorboduc by Lord Sackville, was represented in 1562. Spenser's Pastorals were published in 1579. The Fairy Queen appeared in 1590.

I shall therefore turn back again to that period, after having done homage to the name of Spenser.

He brought to the subject of "The Fairy Queen," a new and enlarged structure of stanza, elaborate and intricate, but well contrived for sustaining the attention of the ear, and concluding with a majestic cadence. In the other poets of Spenser's age we chiefly admire their language, when it seems casually to advance into modern polish and succinctness. But the antiquity of Spenser's style has a peculiar charm. The mistaken opinion that Ben Jonson censured the antiquity of the diction in the "Fairy Queen[1]," has been corrected by Mr. Malone, who pronounces it to be exactly that of his contemporaries. His authority is weighty; still, however, without reviving the exploded error respecting Jonson's censure, one might imagine the

[1] Ben Jonson applied his remark to Spenser's Pastorals.

difference of Spenser's style from that of Shakespeare's, whom he so shortly preceded, to indicate that his gothic subject and story made him lean towards words of the elder time. At all events, much of his expression is now become antiquated; though it is beautiful in its antiquity, and like the moss and ivy on some majestic building, covers the fabric of his language with romantic and venerable associations.

His command of imagery is wide, easy, and luxuriant. He threw the soul of harmony into our verse, and made it more warmly, tenderly, and magnificently descriptive, than it ever was before, or, with a few exceptions, than it has ever been since. It must certainly be owned that in description he exhibits nothing of the brief strokes and robust power, which characterise the very greatest poets; but we shall nowhere find more airy and expansive images of visionary things, a

sweeter tone of sentiment, or a finer flush in the colours of language, than in this Rubens of English poetry. His fancy teems exuberantly in minuteness of circumstance, like a fertile soil sending bloom and verdure through the utmost extremities of the foliage which it nourishes. On a comprehensive view of the whole work, we certainly miss the charm of strength, symmetry, and rapid or interesting progress; for, though the plan which the poet designed is not completed, it is easy to see that no additional cantos could have rendered it less perplexed. But still there is a richness in his materials, even where their coherence is loose, and their disposition confused. The clouds of his allegory may seem to spread into shapeless forms, but they are still the clouds of a glowing atmosphere. Though his story grows desultory, the sweetness and grace of his manner still abide by him. He is like a speaker

whose tones continue to be pleasing, though he may speak too long; or like a painter who makes us forget the defect of his design, by the magic of his colouring. We always rise from perusing him with melody in the mind's ear, and with pictures of romantic beauty impressed on the imagination. For these attractions the "Fairy Queen" will ever continue to be resorted to by the poetical student. It is not, however, very popularly read, and seldom perhaps from beginning to end, even by those who can fully appreciate its beauties. This cannot be ascribed merely to its presenting a few words which are now obsolete; nor can it be owing, as has been sometimes alleged, to the tedium inseparable from protracted allegory. Allegorical fable *may* be made entertaining. With every disadvantage of dress and language, the humble John Bunyan has made this species of writing very amusing.

The reader may possibly smile at the names of Spenser and Bunyan being brought forward for a moment in comparison; but it is chiefly because the humbler allegorist is so poor in language, that his power of interesting the curiosity is entitled to admiration. We are told by critics that the passions may be allegorized, but that Holiness, Justice, and other such thin abstractions of the mind, are too unsubstantial machinery for a poet;—yet we all know how well the author of the Pilgrim's Progress (and he was a poet though he wrote in prose) has managed such abstractions as Mercy and Fortitude. In his artless hands, those attributes cease to be abstractions, and become our most intimate friends. Had Spenser, with all the wealth and graces of his fancy, given his story a more implicit and animated form, I cannot believe that there was any thing in the nature of his machinery to set bounds to his power

of enchantment. Yet, delicious as his poetry is, his story, considered as a romance, is obscure, intricate, and monotonous. He translated entire cantos from Tasso, but adopted the wild and irregular manner of Ariosto. The difference is that Spenser appears, like a civilized being, slow, and sometimes half forlorn, in exploring an uninhabited country, while Ariosto traverses the regions of romance like a hardy native of its pathless wilds. Hurd and others, who forbid us to judge of the "Fairy Queen" by the test of classical unity, and who compare it to a gothic church, or a gothic garden, tell us what is little to the purpose. They cannot persuade us that the story is not too intricate and too diffuse. The thread of the narrative is so entangled, that the poet saw the necessity for explaining the design of his poem in prose, in a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh; and the perspicuity of a poetical design

which requires such an explanation, may, with no great severity, be pronounced a contradiction in terms. It is degrading to poetry, we shall perhaps be told, to attach importance to the mere story which it relates. Certainly the poet is not a great one, whose only charm is the management of his fable; but where there is a fable, it should be perspicuous.

There is one peculiarity in the "Fairy Queen" which, though not a deeply pervading defect, I cannot help considering as an incidental blemish; namely, that the allegory is doubled and crossed with complimentary allusions to living or recent personages, and that the agents are partly historical and partly allegorical. In some instances the characters have a threefold allusion. Gloriana is at once an emblem of true glory, an empress of fairy-land, and her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Envy is a personified passion, and also a witch, and, with no

very charitable insinuation, a type of the unfortunate Mary Queen of Scots. The knight in dangerous distress is Henry IV. of France; and the knight of magnificence, Prince Arthur, the son of Uther Pendragon, an ancient British hero, is the bulwark of the Protestant cause in the Netherlands. Such distraction of allegory cannot well be said to make a fair experiment of its power. The poet may cover his moral meaning under a single and transparent veil of fiction; but he has no right to muffle it up in foldings which hide the form and symmetry of truth.

Upon the whole, if I may presume to measure the imperfections of so great and venerable a genius, I think we may say that, if his popularity be less than universal and complete, it is not so much owing to his obsolete language, nor to degeneracy of modern taste, nor to his choice of allegory as a subject, as to the

want of that consolidating and crowning strength, which alone can establish works of fiction in the favour of all readers and of all ages. This want of strength, it is but justice to say, is either solely or chiefly apparent when we examine the entire structure of his poem, or so large a portion of it as to feel that it does not impel or sustain our curiosity in proportion to its length. To the beauty of insulated passages who can be blind? The sublime description of "*Him who with the Night durst ride*," "The House of Riches," "The Canto of Jealousy," "The Masque of Cupid," and other parts, too many to enumerate, are so splendid, that after reading them, we feel it for the moment invidious to ask if they are symmetrically united into a whole. Succeeding generations have acknowledged the pathos and richness of his strains, and the new contour and enlarged dimensions of grace which he gave to English poetry. He

is the poetical father of a Milton and a Thomson. Gray habitually read him when he wished to frame his thoughts for composition, and there are few eminent poets in the language who have not been essentially indebted to him.

" Hither, as to their fountain, other stars
" Repair, and in their urns draw golden light."

The publication of the Fairy Queen and the commencement of Shakespeare's dramatic career, may be noticed as contemporary events; for by no supposition can Shakespeare's appearance as a dramatist be traced higher than 1589, and that of Spenser's great poem was in the year 1590. I turn back from that date to an earlier period, when the first lineaments of our regular drama began to shew themselves.

Before Elizabeth's reign we had no dramatic authors more important than Bale and Heywood the Epigrammatist. Bale, before the titles of tragedy and

comedy were well distinguished, had written comedies on such subjects as the Resurrection of Lazarus, and the Passion and Sepulture of our Lord. He was, in fact, the last of the race of mystery-writers. Both Bale and Heywood died about the middle of the sixteenth century, but flourished (if such a word can be applied to them) as early as the reign of Henry VIII. Until the time of Elizabeth, the public was contented with mysteries, moralities, or interludes, too humble to deserve the name of comedy. The first of these, the mysteries, originated almost as early as the Conquest, in shews given by the church to the people. The moralities, which were chiefly allegorical, probably arose about the middle of the fifteenth century, and the interludes became prevalent during the reign of Henry VIII[1].

[1] Warton also mentions Rastal, the brother-in-law of Sir Thomas More, who was a printer; but who

Lord Sackville's Gorboduc (first represented in 1562), and Still's Gammer Gurton's Needle, which appeared in 1566, were the earliest, though faint, draughts of our regular tragedy and comedy. They did not, however, immediately supersede the taste for the allegorical moralities. Sackville even introduced dumb shew in his tragedy to explain the piece, and he was not the last of the old dramatists who did so. One might conceive the explanation of allegory by real personages to be a natural complaisance to an audience; but there is something peculiarly ingenious in making allegory explain reality, and the dumb interpret for

is believed by the historian of our poetry to have been also an author, and to have made the moralities in some degree the vehicle of science and philosophy. He published a new interlude on the nature of the four elements, in which The Tracts of America lately discovered and the manners of the natives are described.

those who could speak. In reviewing the rise of the drama, Gammer Gurton's Needle, and Sackville's Gorboduc, form convenient resting places for the memory; but it may be doubted if their superiority over the mysteries and moralities be half so great as their real distance from an affecting tragedy, or an exhilarating comedy. The main incident in Gammer Gurton's Needle is the loss of a needle in a man's small-clothes. Gorboduc has no interesting plot or impassioned dialogue; but it dignified the stage with moral reflection and stately measure. It first introduced blank verse instead of ballad rhymes in the drama. Gascoigne gave a farther popularity to blank verse by his paraphrase of Jocasta, from Euripides, which appeared in 1566. The same author's "Supposes," translated from Ariosto, was our earliest prose comedy. Its dialogue is easy and spirited. Edwards's Palemon and Arcite was acted in the same year, to the great

admiration of Queen Elizabeth, who called the author into her presence, and complimented him on having justly drawn the character of a genuine lover.

Ten tragedies of Seneca were translated into English verse at different times and by different authors before the year 1581. One of these translators was Alexander Neyville, afterwards secretary to Archbishop Parker, whose Oedipus came out as early as 1560; and though he was but a youth of sixteen, his style has considerable beauty. The following lines, which open the first act, may serve as a specimen.

> " The night is gone, and dreadful day begins at length t' appear,
> " And Phœbus, all bedimm'd with clouds, himself aloft doth rear;
> " And, gliding forth, with deadly hue and doleful blaze in skies,
> " Doth bear great terror and dismay to the beholder's eyes.

"Now shall the houses void be seen, with plagues devoured quite,
"And slaughter which the night hath made shall day bring forth to light.
"Doth any man in princely thrones rejoice? O brittle joy!
"How many ills, how fair a face, and yet how much annoy
"In thee doth lurk, and hidden lies what heaps of endless strife!
"They judge amiss, that deem the Prince to have the happy life."

In 1568 was produced the tragedy of Tancred and Sigismunda, by Robert Wilmot and four other students of the Inner Temple. It is reprinted in Reed's plays; but that reprint is taken not from the first edition, but from one greatly polished and amended in 1592. Considered as a piece coming within the verge of Shakespeare's age, it ceases to be wonderful. Immediately subsequent to these writers we meet with several obscure and uninteresting dramatic names,

among which is that of Whetstone[1], the author of Promos and Cassandra, in which piece there is a partial anticipation of the plot of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure. Another is that of Preston, whose tragedy of Cambyses[2] is alluded to by Shakespeare, when Falstaff calls for a cup of sack, that he may weep "in King Cambyses' vein." There is, indeed, matter for weeping in this tragedy; for, in the course of it, an elderly gentleman is flayed alive. To make the skinning more pathetic, his own son is witness to it, and exclaims,

"What child is he of Nature's mould could bide the same to see,
"His father fleaed in this sort? O how it grieveth me!"

It may comfort the reader to know that this theatric decortication was meant to

[1] The others are Garter, Wapel, and Wood.

[2] In the title-page it is denominated "A lamentable Tragedy, full of pleasant Mirth."

be allegorical; and we may believe that it was performed with no degree of stage illusion that could deeply affect the spectator.

In the last twenty years of the sixteenth century, we come to a period when the increasing demand for theatrical entertainments produced play-writers by profession. The earliest of these appears to have been George Peele, who was the city poet and conductor of the civil pageants. His "Arraignment of Paris" came out in 1584. Nash calls him an Atlas in poetry. Unless we make allowance for his antiquity, the expression will appear hyperbolical; but, with that allowance, we may justly cherish the memory of Peele as the oldest genuine dramatic poet of our language. His "David and Bethsabe" is the earliest fountain of pathos and harmony that can be traced in our dramatic poetry. His fancy is rich and his feeling tender, and his conceptions

of dramatic character have no inconsiderable mixture of solid veracity and ideal beauty. There is no such sweetness of versification and imagery to be found in our blank verse anterior to Shakespeare. David's character—the traits both of his guilt and sensibility—his passion for Bethsabe—his art in inflaming the military ambition of Urias, and his grief for Absalom, are delineated with no vulgar skill. The luxuriant image of Bethsabe is introduced by these lines:

Come, gentle Zephyr, trick'd with those perfumes
That erst in Eden sweeten'd Adam's love,
And streak my bosom with thy gentle fan:
This shade, sun-proof, is yet no proof for thee.
Thy body, smoother than this waveless spring,
And purer than the substance of the same,
Can creep through that his lances cannot pierce.
Thou and thy sister, soft and sacred Air,
Goddess of life, and governess of health,
Keep every fountain fresh, and arbour sweet.
No brazen gate her passage can refuse,
Nor bushy thicket bar thy subtle breath.

Then deck thee with thy loose delightsome robes,
And on thy wings bring delicate perfumes,
To play the wanton with us through the leaves.

David. What tones, what words, what looks, what wonders pierce
My soul, incensed with a sudden fire?
What tree, what shade, what spring, what paradise,
Enjoys the beauty of so fair a dame?
Fair Eva, placed in perfect happiness,
Lending her praise-notes to the liberal heavens,
Wrought not more pleasure to her husband's thoughts,
Than this fair woman's words and notes to mine.
May that sweet plain, that bears her pleasant weight,
Be still enamell'd with discolour'd flowers!
That precious fount bear sand of purest gold;
And, for the pebble, let the silver streams
ay upon rubies, sapphires, chrysolites;
he brims let be embraced with golden curls
Of moss, that sleeps with sounds the waters make;
For joy to feed the fount with their recourse
Let all the grass that beautifies her bower
Bear manna every morn instead of dew.

* * * * * * * *

Joab thus describes the glory of David:

Beauteous and bright is he among the tribes;
As when the sun, attir'd in glistering robe,
Comes dancing from his oriental gate,

And, bridegroom-like, hurls through the gloomy air
His radiant beams: such doth King David shew,
Crown'd with the honour of his enemies' town,
Shining in riches like the firmament,
The starry vault that overhangs the earth;
So looketh David, King of Israel.

At the conclusion of the tragedy, when David gives way to his grief for Absalom, he is roused with great dignity and energy by the speech of Joab. When informed by Joab of the death of his son, David exclaims:

David. Thou man of blood! thou sepulchre of death!
Whose marble breast entombs my bowels quick,
Did I not charge thee, nay, entreat thy hand,
Even for my sake, to spare my Absalom?
And hast thou now, in spite of David's health,
And scorn to do my heart some happiness,
Given him the sword, and spilt his purple soul?

Joab. What! irks it David, that he victor breathes,
That Juda, and the fields of Israel
Should cleanse their faces from their children's blood?
What! art thou weary of thy royal rule?
Is Israel's throne a serpent in thine eyes,
And he that set thee there, so far from thanks,

That thou must curse his servant for his sake?
Hast thou not said, that, as the morning light,
The cloudless morning, so should be thine house,
And not as flowers, by the brightest rain,
Which grow up quickly, and as quickly fade?
Hast thou not said, the wicked are as thorns,
That cannot be preserved with the hand;
And that the man shall touch them must be armed
With coats of iron, and garments made of steel?
And art thou angry he is now cut off,
That led the guiltless swarming to their deaths,
And was more wicked than an host of men?
Advance thee from thy melancholy den,
And deck thy body with thy blissful robes,
Or, by the Lord that sways the Heav'n, I swear,
I'll lead thine armies to another king,
Shall cheer them for their princely chivalry,
And not sit daunted, frowning in the dark,
When his fair looks, with wine and oil refresh'd,
Should dart into their bosoms gladsome beams,
And fill their stomachs with triumphant feasts;
That, when elsewhere stern War shall sound his
 trump,
And call another battle to the field,
Fame still may bring thy valiant soldiers home,
And for their service happily confess
She wanted worthy trumps to sound their prowess;
Take thou this course, and live;—*Refuse, and die.*

Lyly, Kyd, Marlowe, Legge, Greene, and Lodge, were the other writers for our early stage, a part of whose career preceded that of Shakespeare. Lyly, whose dramatic language is prose, has traits of genius which we should not expect from his generally depraved taste, and he has several graceful interspersions of "sweet lyric song." But his manner, on the whole, is *stilted.* "Brave Marlowe, bathed in the Thespian springs," of whose "mighty muse" Ben Jonson himself speaks reverentially, had powers of no ordinary class, and even ventured a few steps into the pathless sublime. But his pathos is dreary, and the terrors of his Muse remind us more of Minerva's gorgon than her countenance. The first sober and cold school of tragedy, which began with Lord Sackville's Gorboduc, was succeeded by one of headlong extravagance. Kyd's bombast was proverbial

in his own day. With him the genius of tragedy might be said to have run mad; and, if we may judge of one work, the joint production of Greene and Lodge, to have hardly recovered her wits in the company of those authors. The piece to which I allude is entitled "A Looking-glass for London." There, the Tamburlane of Kyd is fairly rivalled in rant and blasphemy by the hero Rasni, King of Nineveh, who boasts

"Great Jewry's God, who foil'd great Benhadab,
"Could not rebate the strength that Rasni brought;
"For be he God in Heav'n, yet viceroys know
"Rasni is God on earth, and none but he."

In the course of the play, the imperial swaggerer marries his own sister, who is quite as consequential a character as himself; but finding her struck dead by lightning, he deigns to espouse her lady-in-waiting, and is finally converted after his wedding, by Jonah, who soon after-

wards arrives at Nineveh. It would be perhaps unfair, however, to assume this tragedy as a fair test of the dramatic talents of either Greene or Lodge. Ritson recommended the dramas of Greene as well worthy of being collected. The taste of that antiquary was not exquisite, but his knowledge may entitle his opinion to consideration.

Among these precursors of Shakespeare we may trace, in Peele and Marlowe, a pleasing dawn of the drama, though it was by no means a dawn corresponding to so bright a sunrise as the appearance of his mighty genius. He created our *romantic* drama, or if the assertion is to be qualified, it requires but a small qualification. There were undoubtedly prior occupants of the dramatic ground in our language; but they appear only like unprosperous settlers on the patches and skirts of a wilderness, which he converted into a garden. He

is therefore never compared with his native predecessors. Criticism goes back for names worthy of being put in competition with his, to the first great masters of dramatic invention; and even in the points of dissimilarity between them and him, discovers some of the highest indications of his genius. Compared with the classical composers of antiquity, he is to our conceptions nearer the character of an universal poet; more acquainted with man in the real world, and more terrific and bewitching in the preternatural. He expanded the magic circle of the drama beyond the limits that belonged to it in antiquity; made it embrace more time and locality, filled it with larger business and action, with vicissitudes of gay and serious emotion, which classical taste had kept divided; with characters which developed humanity in stronger lights and subtler movements, and with a language more wildly, more

playfully diversified by fancy and passion, than was ever spoken on any stage. Like Nature herself, he presents alternations of the gay and the tragic; and his mutability, like the suspense and precariousness of real existence, often deepens the force of our impressions. He converted imitation into illusion. To say that, magician as he was, he was not faultless, is only to recal the flat and stale truism, that every thing human is imperfect. But how to estimate his imperfections! To praise him is easy—*In facili causa cuivis licet esse diserto*—But to make a special, full, and accurate estimate of his imperfections would require a delicate and comprehensive discrimination and an authority which are almost as seldom united in one man as the powers of Shakespeare himself. He is the poet of the world. The magnitude of his genius puts it beyond all private opinion to set defined limits to the admiration

which is due to it. We know, upon the whole, that the sum of blemishes to be deducted from his merits is not great, and we should scarcely be thankful to one who should be anxious to make it. No other poet triumphs so anomalously over eccentricities and peculiarities in composition, which would appear blemishes in others; so that his blemishes and beauties have an affinity which we are jealous of trusting any hand with the task of separating. We dread the interference of criticism with a fascination so often inexplicable by critical laws, and justly apprehend that any man in standing between us and Shakespeare may shew for pretended spots upon his disk only the shadows of his own opacity.

Still it is not a part even of that enthusiastic creed, to believe that he has no excessive mixture of the tragic and comic, no blemishes of language in the elliptical throng and impatient pressure

of his images, no irregularities of plot and action, which another Shakespeare would avoid, if "nature had not broken the mould in which she made him," or if he should come back into the world to blend experience with inspiration.

The bare name of the dramatic unities is apt to excite revolting ideas of pedantry, arts of poetry, and French criticism. With none of these do I wish to annoy the reader. I conceive that it may be said of those unities as of fire and water, that they are good servants but bad masters. In perfect rigour they were never imposed by the Greeks, and they would be still heavier shackles if they were closely rivetted on our own drama. It would be worse than useless to confine dramatic action literally and immoveably to one spot, or its imaginary time to the time in which it is represented. On the other hand, dramatic time and place cannot surely admit of indefinite expansion.

It would be better, for the sake of illusion and probability[1], to change the scene from Windsor to London, than from London to Pekin; it would look more like reality if a messenger, who went and returned in the course of the play, told us of having performed a journey of ten or twenty, rather than of a thousand miles, and if the spectator had neither that nor any other circumstance to make him ask how so much could be performed in so short a time.

In an abstract view of dramatic art, its principles must appear to lie nearer to unity than to the opposite extreme of

[1] Dr. Johnson has said, with regard to local unity in the drama, that we can as easily imagine ourselves in one place as another. So we can, at the beginning of a play; but having taken our imaginary station with the poet in one country, I do not believe with Dr. Johnson, that we change into a different one with perfect facility to the imagination. Lay the first act in Europe, and we surely do not naturally expect to find the second in America.

disunion, in our conceptions of time and place. Giving up the law of unity in its literal rigour, there is still a latitude of its application which may preserve proportion and harmony in the drama.

The brilliant and able Schlegel has traced the principles of what he denominates the romantic, in opposition to the classical drama; and conceives that Shakespeare's theatre, when tried by those principles, will be found not to have violated any of the unities, if they are largely and liberally understood. I have no doubt that Mr. Schlegel's criticism will be found to have proved this point in a considerable number of the works of our mighty poet. There are traits, however, in Shakespeare, which, I must own, appear to my humble judgment incapable of being illustrated by any system or principles of art. I do not allude to his historical plays, which, expressly from being historical, may be

called a privileged class. But in those of purer fiction, it strikes me that there are licences conceded indeed to imagination's "charter'd libertine," but anomalous with regard to any thing which can be recognized as principles in dramatic art. When Perdita, for instance, grows from the cradle to the marriage altar in the course of the play, I can perceive no unity in the design of the piece, and take refuge in the supposition of Shakespeare's genius triumphing and trampling over art. Yet Mr. Schlegel, as far as I have observed, makes no exception to this breach of temporal unity; nor, in proving Shakespeare a regular artist on a mighty scale, does he deign to notice this circumstance, even as the *ultima Thule* of his licence. If a man contends that dramatic laws are all idle restrictions, I can understand him; or if he says that Perdita's growth on the stage is a trespass on art but that Shakespeare's

fascination over and over again redeems it, I can both understand and agree with him. But when I am left to infer that all this is right on romantic principles, I confess that those principles become too romantic for my conception. If Perdita may be born and married on the stage, why may not Webster's Duchess of Malfy lie-in between the acts, and produce a fine family of tragic children? Her Grace actually does so in Webster's drama, and he is a poet of some genius, though it is not quite so sufficient as Shakespeare's, to give a " sweet oblivious antidote" to such " perilous stuff." It is not, however, either in favour of Shakespeare's or of Webster's genius that we shall be called on to make allowance, if we justify in the drama the lapse of such a number of years as may change the apparent identity of an individual. If romantic unity is to be so largely interpreted, the old Spanish dramas, where youths grow greybeards upon the stage, the mysteries and

moralities, and productions teeming with the wildest anachronism, might all come in with their grave or laughable claims to romantic legitimacy.

Nam sic
Et Laberi mimos ut pulchra poemata mirer. Hor.

On a general view, I conceive it may be said, that Shakespeare nobly and legitimately enlarged the boundaries of time and place in the drama; but in extreme cases, I would rather agree with Cumberland, to waive all mention of his name in speaking of dramatic laws, than accept of those licences for art which are not art, and designate irregularity by the name of order.

There were other poets who started nearly coeval with Ben Jonson in the attempt to give a classical form to our drama. Daniel, for instance, brought out his tragedy of Cleopatra in 1593; but his elegant genius wanted the strength requisite for great dramatic efforts. Still

more unequal to the task was the Earl of Stirling, who published his cold "*monarchic tragedies*" in 1504. The triumph of founding English classical comedy belonged exclusively to Jonson. In his tragedies it is remarkable that he freely dispenses with the unities, though in those tragedies he brings classical antiquity in the most distinct and learnedly authenticated traits before our eyes. The vindication of his great poetic memory forms an agreeable contrast in modern criticism with the bold bad things which used to be said of him in a former period; as when Young compared him to a blind Samson, who pulled down the ruins of antiquity on his head and buried his genius beneath them. Hurd, though he inveighed against the too abstract conception of his characters, pronouncing them rather personified humours than natural beings, did him, nevertheless, the justice to quote one short and lovely passage from

one of his masques, and the beauty of that passage probably turned the attention of many readers to his then neglected compositions[1]. It is indeed but one of the many beauties which justify all that has been said of Jonson's lyrical powers. In that fanciful region of the drama (the masque) he stands as pre-eminent as in comedy; or if he can be said to be rivalled, it is only by Milton. And our surprise at the wildness and sweetness of his fancy in one

[1] Namely, the song of Night, in the masque of "The Vision of Delight."

"Break, Phant'sie, from thy cave of cloud,
"And spread thy purple wings;
"Now all thy figures are allow'd,
"And various shapes of things;
"Create of airy forms a stream:
"It must have blood, and nought of phlegm,
"And though it be a waking dream,
"Yet let it like an odour rise
"To all the senses here,
"And fall like sleep upon their eyes,
"Or music in their ear."

walk of composition is increased by the stern and rigid (sometimes rugged) air of truth which he preserves in the other. In the regular drama he certainly holds up no romantic mirror to nature. His object was to exhibit human characters at once strongly comic and severely and instructively true; to nourish the understanding, while he feasted the sense of ridicule. He is more anxious for verisimilitude than even for comic effect. He understood the humours and peculiarities of his species scientifically, and brought them forward in their greatest contrasts and subtlest modifications. If Shakespeare carelessly scattered illusion, Jonson skilfully prepared it. This is speaking of Jonson in his happiest manner. There is a great deal of harsh and sour fruit in his miscellaneous poetry. It is acknowledged that in the drama he frequently overlabours his delineation of character, and wastes it tediously upon

uninteresting humours and peculiarities. He is a moral painter, who delights over much to shew his knowledge of moral anatomy. Beyond the pale of his three great dramas, "The Fox," "The Epicene, or Silent Woman," and "The Alchymist," it would not be difficult to find many striking exceptions to that love of truth and probability, which, in a general view, may be regarded as one of his best characteristics. Even within that pale, namely, in his masterly character of Volpone, one is struck with what, if it be not an absolute breach, is at least a very bold stretch, of probability. It is true that Volpone is altogether a being daringly conceived; and those who think that art spoilt the originality of Jonson, may well rectify their opinion by considering the force of imagination which it required to concentrate the traits of such a character as the Fox; not to speak of his Mosca, who is the phœnix of

all parasites. Volpone himself is not like the common misers of comedy, a mere money-loving dotard—a hard shrivelled old mummy, with no other spice than his avarice to preserve him; he is a happy villain, a jolly misanthrope—a little god in his own selfishness, and Mosca is his priest and prophet. Vigorous and healthy, though past the prime of life, he hugs himself in his arch humour, his successful knavery and imposture, his sensuality and his wealth, with an unhallowed relish of selfish existence. His passion for wealth seems not to be so great as his delight in gulling the human "vultures and gorecrows" who flock round him at the imagined approach of his dissolution; the speculators who put their gold, as they conceive, into his dying gripe, to be returned to them a thousand fold in his will. Yet still, after this exquisite rogue has stood his trial in a sweat of agony at the *scrutineum*, and

blest his stars at having narrowly escaped being put to the torture, there is something (one would think) a little too strong for probability, in that mischievous mirth and love of tormenting his own dupes, which bring him, by his own folly, a second time within the fangs of justice. The Fox and the Alchymist seem to have divided Jonson's admirers as to which of them may be considered his masterpiece. In confessing my partiality to the prose comedy of "The Silent Woman," considered merely as a comedy, I am by no means forgetful of the rich eloquence which poetry imparts to the two others. But the Epicene, in my humble apprehension, exhibits Jonson's humour in the most exhilarating perfection. With due admiration for the "Alchymist," I cannot help thinking the jargon of the chemical jugglers, though it displays the learning of the author, to be tediously profuse. "The

Fox" rises to something higher than comic effect. It is morally impressive. It detains us at particular points in serious terror and suspense. But the Epicene is purely facetious. I know not, indeed, why we should laugh more at the sufferings of Morose than at those of the sensualist Sir Epicure Mammon, who deserves his miseries much better than the rueful and pitiable Morose. Yet so it is, that, though the feelings of pathos and ridicule seem so widely different, a certain tincture of the pitiable makes comic distress more irresistible. Poor Morose suffers what the fancy of Dante could not have surpassed in description, if he had sketched out a ludicrous purgatory. A lover of quiet—a man exquisitely impatient of rude sounds and loquacity, who lived in a retired street—who barricadoed his doors with mattresses to prevent disturbance to his ears, and who married a wife because he could

with difficulty prevail upon her to speak to him—has hardly tied the fatal knot when his house is tempested by female eloquence, and the marriage of him who had pensioned the city wakes to keep away from his neighbourhood, is celebrated by a concert of trumpets. He repairs to a court of justice to get his marriage if possible dissolved, but is driven back in despair by the intolerable noise of the court. For this marriage how exquisitely we are prepared by the scene of courtship. When Morose questions his intended bride about her likings and habits of life, she plays her part so hypocritically, that he seems for a moment impatient of her reserve, and with the most ludicrous cross feelings wishes her to speak more loudly, that he may have a proof of her taciturnity from her own lips; but, recollecting himself, he gives way to the rapturous satisfaction of having found a silent woman, and ex-

claims to Cutbeard, "Go thy ways and get me a clergyman presently, with a soft low voice, to marry us, and pray him he will not be impertinent, but brief as he can."

The art of Jonson was not confined to the cold observation of the unities of place and time, but appears in the whole adaptation of his incidents and characters to the support of each other. Beneath his learning and art he moves with an activity which may be compared to the strength of a man who can leap and bound under the heaviest armour.

The works of Jonson bring us into the seventeenth century; and early in that century, our language, besides the great names already mentioned, contains many other poets whose works may be read with a pleasure independent of the interest which we take in their antiquity.

Drayton and Daniel, though the most opposite in the cast of their genius, are

pre-eminent in the second poetical class of their age, for their common merit of clear and harmonious diction. Drayton is prone to Ovidian conceits, but he plays with them so gaily, that they almost seem to become him as if natural. His feeling is neither deep, nor is the happiness of his fancy of long continuance, but its short April gleams are very beautiful. His legend of the Duke of Buckingham opens with a fine description. Unfortunately, his descriptions in long poems are, like many fine mornings, succeeded by a cloudy day.

" The lark, that holds observance to the sun,
" Quaver'd her clear notes in the quiet air,
" And on the river's murmuring base did run,
" Whilst the pleas'd Heavens her fairest livery wear;
" The place such pleasure gently did prepare,
" The flowers my smell, the flood my taste to steep,
" And the much softness lulled me asleep.
" When, in a vision, as it seemed to me,
" Triumphal music from the flood arose."

Of the grand beauties of poetry he has none; but of the sparkling lightness of his best manner an example may be given in the following stanzas, from his sketch of the Poet's Elysium.

A Paradise on earth is found,
  Though far from vulgar sight,
Which with those pleasures doth abound,
  That it Elysium hight.
*   *   *   *   *   *   *

The winter here a summer is,
  No waste is made by time;
Nor doth the autumn ever miss
  The blossoms of the prime.
*   *   *   *   *   *   *

Those cliffs whose craggy sides are clad
  With trees of sundry suits,
Which make continual summer glad,
  Ev'n bending with their fruits—

Some ripening, ready some to fall,
  Some blossom'd, some to bloom,
Like gorgeous hangings on the wall
  Of some rich princely room.
*   *   *   *   *   *   *

There, in perpetual summer shade,
   Apollo's prophets sit,
Among the flowers that never fade,
   But flourish like their wit;

To whom the nymphs, upon their lyres,
   Tune many a curious lay,
And, with their most melodious quires,
   Make short the longest day.

Daniel is "*somewhat a-flat*," as one of his contemporaries said of him, but he had more sensibility than Drayton, and his moral reflection rises to higher dignity. The lyrical poetry of Elizabeth's age runs often into pastoral insipidity and fantastic carelessness, though there may be found in some of the pieces of Sir Philip Sydney, Lodge, Marlowe, and Breton, not only a sweet wild spirit but an exquisite finish of expression. Of these combined beauties Marlowe's song, "Come live with me, and be my love," is an example. The Soul's Errand, by whomsoever it was

written, is a burst of genuine poetry[1]. I know not how that short production has ever affected other readers, but it carries to my imagination an appeal which I cannot easily account for from a few simple rhymes. It places the last and inexpressibly awful hour of existence before my view, and sounds like a sentence of vanity on the things of this world, pronounced by a dying man, whose eye glares on eternity, and whose voice is raised by strength from another world[2]. Raleigh, also (according to Puttenham), had a "lofty and passionate" vein. It is difficult, however, to authenticate his poetical relics. Of the numerous sonnetteers of that time (keeping Shakespeare and Spenser apart) Drummond and Da-

[1] Vide these Selections, vol. II. p. 220.

[2] Is not the Soul's Errand the same poem with the Soul's Knell, which is always ascribed to Richard Edwards?—If so, why has it been inserted in Raleigh's poems by their last editor?

niel are certainly the best. Hall was the master satirist of the age; obscure and quaint at times, but full of nerve and picturesque illustration. No contemporary satirist has given equal grace and dignity to moral censure. Very unequal to him in style, though often as original in thought, and as graphic in exhibiting manners, is Donne, some of whose satires have been modernized by Pope. Corbet has left some humorous pieces of raillery on the Puritans. Withers, all fierce and fanatic on the opposite side, has nothing more to recommend him in invective, than the sincerity of that zeal for God's house, which eat him up. Marston, better known in the drama than in satire, was characterised by his contemporaries for his ruffian style. He has more will than skill in invective. "*He puts in his blows with love*," as the pugilists say of a hard but artless fighter; a degrading image, but on that account not the less applicable to a coarse satirist.

Donne was the "best good-natured man, with the worst-natured Muse." A romantic and uxorious lover, he addresses the object of his real tenderness with ideas that outrage decorum. He begins his own epithalamium with a most indelicate invocation to his bride. His ruggedness and whim are almost proverbially known. Yet there is a beauty of thought which at intervals rises from his chaotic imagination, like the form of Venus smiling on the waters. Giles and Phineas Fletcher possessed harmony and fancy. The simple Warner has left, in his "Argentile and Curan," perhaps the finest pastoral episode in our language. Browne was an elegant describer of rural scenes, though incompetent to fill them with life and manners. Chalkhill[1] is a

[1] Chalkhill was a gentleman and a scholar, the friend of Spenser. He died before he could finish the fable of his Thealma and Clearchus, which was published, long after his death, by Isaac Walton.

writer of pastoral romance, from whose work of Thealma and Clearchus a specimen should have been given in the body of these Selections, but was omitted by an accidental oversight. Chalkhill's numbers are as musical as those of any of his contemporaries, who employ the same form of versification. It was common with the writers of the heroic couplet of that age to bring the sense to a full and frequent pause in the middle of the line. This break, by relieving the uniformity of the couplet measure, sometimes produces a graceful effect and a varied harmony which we miss in the exact and unbroken tune of our later rhyme; a beauty of which the reader will probably be sensible, in perusing such lines of Chalkhill's as these—

"And ever and anon he might well hear
"A sound of music steal in at his ear,
"As the wind gave it being. So sweet an air
"Would strike a siren mute ——."

This relief, however, is used rather too liberally by the elder rhymists, and is perhaps as often the result of their carelessness as of their good taste. Nor is it at all times obtained by them without the sacrifice of one of the most important uses of rhyme; namely, the distinctness of its effect in marking the measure. The chief source of the gratification which the ear finds in rhyme is our perceiving the emphasis of sound coincide with that of sense. In other words, the rhyme is best placed on the most emphatic word in the sentence. But it is nothing unusual with the ancient couplet writers, by laying the rhyme on unimportant words, to disappoint the ear of this pleasure, and to exhibit the restraint of rhyme without its emphasis.

As a poetical narrator of fiction, Chalkhill is rather tedious; but he atones for the slow progress of his narrative by

many touches of rich and romantic description.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRIESTESS OF DIANA.

FROM THEALMA AND CLEARCHUS.

Within a little silent grove hard by,
Upon a small ascent, he might espy
A stately chapel, richly gilt without,
Beset with shady sycamores about;
And ever and anon he might well hear
A sound of music steal in at his ear,
As the wind gave it being. So sweet an air
Would strike a siren mute, and ravish her.
He sees no creature that might cause the same,
But he was sure that from the grove it came,
And to the grove he goes to satisfy
The curiosity of ear and eye.
Thorough the thick-leav'd boughs he makes a way,
Nor could the scratching brambles make him stay,
But on he rushes, and climbs up a hill,
Thorough a glade. He saw and heard his fill—
A hundred virgins there he might espy,
Prostrate before a marble deity,
Which, by its portraiture, appear'd to be
The image of Diana. On their knee

They tended their devotions with sweet airs,
Offering the incense of their praise and prayers,
Their garments all alike * * *
* * * * * * * * *
And cross their snowy silken robes they wore
An azure scarf, with stars embroider'd o'er;
Their hair in curious tresses was knot up,
Crown'd with a silver crescent on the top;
A silver bow their left hand held, their right,
For their defence, held a sharp-headed flight
Of arrows. * * * * *
Under their vestments, something short before,
White buskins, laced with ribbanding, they wore,
It was a catching sight to a young eye,
That Love had fix'd before He might espy
One whom the rest had, sphere-like, circled round,
Whose head was with a golden chaplet crown'd:
He could not see her face, only his ear
Was blest with the sweet words that came from her.

THE IMAGE OF JEALOUSY IN THE CHAPEL OF DIANA.

* * * * A curious eye
Might see some relics of a piece of art
That Psyche made, when Love first fir'd her heart;
It was the story of her thoughts, that she
Curiously wrought in lively imagery;

Among the rest she thought of Jealousy,
Time left untouch'd to grace antiquity,
She was decypher'd by a tim'rous dame,
Wrapt in a yellow mantle lin'd with flame;
Her looks were pale, contracted with a frown,
Her eyes suspicious, wandering up and down;
Behind her Fear attended, big with child,
Able to fright Presumption if she smil'd;
After her flew a sigh between two springs
Of briny waters. On her dove-like wings
She bore a letter seal'd with a half moon,
And superscrib'd—this from Suspicion.

ABODE OF THE WITCH ORANDRA.

Her cell was hewn out in the marble rock
By more than human art. She need not knock—
The door stood always open, large and wide,
Grown o'er with woolly moss on either side,
And interwove with ivy's flattering twines,
Through which the carbuncle and diamond shines;
Not set by art, but there by Nature sown
At the world's birth; so starlike bright they shone,
They serv'd instead of tapers, to give light
To the dark entry. * * * *
* * * * * In they went:
The ground was strewn with flowers, whose sweet
scent,*

Mixt with the choice perfumes from India brought,
Intoxicates his brains, and quickly caught
His credulous sense. The walls were gilt, and set
With precious stones, and all the roof was fret
With a gold vine, whose straggling branches spread
O'er all the arch—the swelling grapes were red;
This art had made of rubies, cluster'd so,
To the quickest eye they more than seem'd to grow.
About the walls lascivious pictures hung,
Such as whereof loose Ovid sometimes sung;
On either side a crew of dwarfish elves
Held waxen tapers taller than themselves,
Yet so well shaped unto their little stature,
So angel-like in face, so sweet in feature,
Their rich attire so differing, yet so well
Becoming her that wore it, none could tell
Which was the fairest. * * *
After a low salute they all 'gan sing,
And circle in the stranger in a ring;
Orandra to her charms was stept aside,
Leaving her guest half won, and wanton ey'd:
He had forgot his herb—cunning delight
Had so bewitch'd his ears, and blear'd his sight,
That he was not himself. * * *
* * * * * Unto his view
She represents a banquet, usher'd in
By such a shape as she was sure would win

His appetite to taste—so like she was
To his Clarinda both in shape and face,
So voiced, so habited—of the same gait
And comely gesture. * * *
* * * Hardly did he refrain
From sucking in destruction at her lip;
Sin's cup will poison at the smallest sip.
She weeps and woos again with subtleness,
And with a frown she chides his backwardness:
Have you (said she) sweet prince, so soon forgot
Your own belov'd Clarinda? Are you not
The same you were, that you so slightly set
By her that once you made the cabinet
Of your choice counsel? Hath some worthier love
Stole your affections? What is it should move
You to dislike so soon? Must I still taste
No other dish but sorrow? When we last
Emptied our souls into each other's breast,
It was not so. * * *
* * * With that she wept afresh * *
* * She seem'd to fall into a swound;
And stooping down to raise her from the ground,
He puts his herb into his mouth, whose taste
Soon chang'd his mind: he lifts her—but in vain,
His hands fell off, and she fell down again:
With that she lent him such a frown as would
Have kill'd a common lover, and made cold

Ev'n lust itself. * * * *
* * * The lights went out,
And darkness hung the chamber round about:
A yelling, hellish noise was each where heard.

In classical translation Phaer and Golding were the earliest successors of Lord Surrey. Phaer published his Virgil in 1562, and Golding his Ovid three years later. Both of these translators, considering the state of the language, have considerable merit. Like them, Chapman, who came later, employed in his version of the Iliad the fourteen syllable rhyme, which was then in favourite use. Of the three translators, Phaer is the most faithful and simple, Golding the most musical, and Chapman the most spirited; though Chapman is prone to the turgid, and often false to the sense of Homer. Phaer's Æneid has been praised by a modern writer, in the "Lives of the Nephews of Milton," with absurd exaggera-

tion. I have no wish to disparage the fair value of the old translator, but when the biographer of Milton's nephews declares, "that nothing in language or conception can exceed the style in which Phaer treats of the last day of the existence of Troy," I know of no answer to this assertion but to give the reader the very passage, which is pronounced so inimitable—although, to save myself farther impediment in the text, I must subjoin it in a note[1].

[1] ENEAS'S NARRATIVE AFTER THE DEATH OF PRIAM.

ENEID II.

Than first the cruel fear me caught, and sore my
sprites appall'd,
And on my father dear I thought, his face to mind
I call'd,
Whan slain with grisly wound our king, him like of
age in sight,
Lay gasping dead, and of my wife Creuse bethought
the plight.

The harmony of Fairfax is justly celebrated. Joshua Sylvester's version of the

Alone, forsake, my house despoiled, my child what
chaunce had take,
I looked, and about me view'd what strength I might
me make.
All men had me forsake for paynes, and down their
bodies drew,
To ground they leapt, and some for woe themselves
in fires they threw.
And now alone was left but I whan Vesta's Temple
stair
To keep and secretly to lurk all crouching close in
chair,
Dame Helen I might see to sit; bright burnings
gave me light,
Wherever I went, the ways I pass'd, all thing was
set in sight.
She fearing her the Trojans wrath, for Troy destroy'd
to wreke,
Greek's torments and her husband's force, whose
wedlock she did break,
The plague of Troy and of her country, monster most
ontame,
There sat she with her hated head, by the altars hid
for shame.

"Divine Weeks and Works" of the French poet Dubartas, was among the most po-

Straight in my breast I felt a fire, deep wrath my heart did strain,
My country's fall to wreak, and bring that cursed wretch to pain.
What! shall she into her country soil of Sparta and high Mycene,
All safe shall she return, and there on Troy triumph as queen?
Her husband, children, country, kynne, her house, her parents old,
With Trojan wives, and Trojan lords, her slaves shall she behold?
Was Priam slain with sword for this? Troy burnt with fire so wood?
Is it herefore that Dardan strondes so often hath sweat with blood?
Not so, for though it be no praise on woman kind to wreak,
And honour none there lieth in this, nor name for men to speak;
Yet quench I shall this poison here, and due deserts to dight,
Men shall commend my zeal, and ease my mind I shall outright:

pular of our early translations; and the obligations which Milton is alleged to

This much for all my peoples' bones and country's
flame to quite.
These things within myself I tost, and fierce with
force I ran,
Whan to my face my mother great, so brim no time
till than,
Appearing shew'd herself in sight, all shining pure
by night,
Right goddess-like appearing, such as heavens be-
holds her bright.
So great with majesty she stood, and me by right-
hand take,
She stay'd, and red as rose, with mouth these words
to me she spake:
My son, what sore outrâge so wild thy wrathful mind
upstares?
Why frettest thou, or where alway from us thy care
withdrawn appears?
Nor first unto thy father see'st, whom, feeble in all
this woe,
Thou hast forsake, nor if thy wife doth live thou
know'st or no,
Nor young Ascanius, thy child, whom throngs of
Greeks about
Doth swarming run, and, were not my relief, with-
outen doubt

have owed to it, have revived Sylvester's name with some interest in modern criticism. Sylvester was a puritan, and so

By this time flames had by devoured, or swords of
en'mies kill'd.
It is not Helen's fate of Greece this town, my son,
hath spill'd,
Nor Paris is to blame for this, but Gods, with grace
unkind,
This wealth hath overthrown, a Troy from top to
ground outwind.
Behold! for now away the cloud and dim fog will I
take,
That over mortal eyes doth hang, and blind thy sight
doth make;
Thou to thy parents haste, take heed (dread not) my
mind obey.
In yonder place, where stones from stones, and
buildings huge to sway,
Thou seest, and mixt in dust and smoke, thick
streams of richness rise,
Himself the God Neptune that side doth turn in
wonders wise,
With fork three-tin'd the walls uproots, foundations
all too shakes,
And quite from under soil the town with ground-
works all uprakes.

was the publisher of his work, Humphrey Lownes, who lived in the same street with Milton's father; and from the congeniality of their opinions, it is not improbable that they might be acquainted. It is easily to be conceived that Milton often repaired to the shop of Lownes, and there first met with the pious didactic poem. Lauder was the earliest to trace Milton's particular thoughts and expressions to Sylvester; and, as might be expected, maliciously exaggerated them. Later writers took up the subject with a very different spirit. Mr. Todd, the learned editor of Spenser, noticed in a number of the Gentleman's Magazine[1], the pro-

On yonder side, with furies mixt, Dame Juno fiercely
stands,
The gates she keeps, and from their ships the Greeks,
her friendly bands,
In armour girt, she calls.

[1] For November 1796.

bability of Milton's early acquaintance with the translation of Dubartas's poem; and Mr. Dunster has since, in his "*Essay on Milton's early reading*," supported the opinion, that the same work contains the *prima stamina* of Paradise Lost, and laid the first foundation of that "*monumentum ære perennius.*" Thoughts and expressions there certainly are in Milton, which leave his acquaintance with Sylvester hardly questionable; although some of the expressions quoted by Mr. Dunster, which are common to them both, may be traced back to other poets older than Sylvester. The entire amount of his obligations, as Mr. Dunster justly admits, cannot detract from our opinion of Milton. If Sylvester ever stood high in his favour, it must have been when he was very young. The beauties which occur so strangely intermixed with bathos and flatness in Sylvester's poem, might have caught the youthful discernment, and

long dwelt in the memory, of the great poet. But he must have perused it with disgust at Sylvester's general manner. Many of his epithets and happy phrases were really worthy of Milton; but by far the greater proportion of his thoughts and expressions have a quaintness and flatness more worthy of Quarles and Withers.

The following lines may serve as no unfavourable specimens of his translation of Dubartas's poem.

PROBABILITY OF THE CELESTIAL ORBS BEING INHABITED.

I not believe that the great architect
With all these fires the heavenly arches deck'd
Only for shew, and with these glistering shields
T' amaze poor shepherds, watching in the fields;
I not believe that the least flow'r which pranks
Our garden borders, or our common banks,
And the least stone, that in her warming lap
Our mother earth doth covetously wrap,
Hath some peculiar virtue of its own,
And that the glorious stars of heav'n have none.

THE SERPENT'S ADDRESS TO EVE WHEN HE TEMPTED HER IN EDEN.

As a false lover, that thick snares hath laid
T' entrap the honour of a fair young maid,
If she (though little) list'ning ear affords
To his sweet-courting, deep-affecting words,
Feels some assuaging of his ardent flame,
And sooths himself with hopes to win his game,
While, wrapt with joy, he on his point persists,
That parleying city never long resists—
Even so the serpent. * * * *
Perceiving Eve his flattering gloze digest,
He prosecutes, and jocund doth not rest.
No, Fair, (quoth he) believe not that the care
God hath from spoiling Death mankind to spare
Makes him forbid you, on such strict condition,
His purest, rarest, fairest fruit's fruition.
* * * * * * * *
Begin thy bliss, and do not fear the threat
Of an uncertain Godhead, only great
Through self-aw'd zeal—put on the glist'ning pall
Of immortality.

MORNING.

Arise betimes, while th' opal-colour'd morn
In golden pomp doth May-day's door adorn.

The "opal-colour'd morn" is a beautiful expression, that I do not remember any other poet to have ever used.

The school of poets which is commonly called the metaphysical, began in the reign of Elizabeth with Donne; but the term of metaphysical poetry would apply with much more justice to the quatrains of Sir John Davies, and those of Sir Fulke Greville, writers who, at a later period, found imitators in Sir Thomas Overbury and Sir William Davenant. Davies's poem on the Immortality of the Soul, entitled "*Nosce teipsum*," will convey a much more favourable idea of metaphysical poetry than the wittiest effusions of Donne and his followers. Davies carried abstract reasoning into verse with an acuteness and felicity which have seldom been equalled. He reasons, undoubtedly, with too much labour, formality, and subtlety, to afford uniform poetical

pleasure. The generality of his stanzas exhibit hard arguments interwoven with the pliant materials of fancy so closely, that we may compare them to a texture of cloth and metallic threads, which is cold and stiff, while it is splendidly curious. There is this difference, however, between Davies and the commonly styled metaphysical poets, that *he* argues like a hard-thinker, and *they*, for the most part, like madmen. If we conquer the drier parts of Davies's poem, and bestow a little attention on thoughts which were meant, not to gratify the indolence but to challenge the activity of the mind, we shall find in the entire essay fresh beauties at every perusal: for in the happier parts we come to logical truths so well illustrated by ingenious similes, that we know not whether to call the thoughts more poetically or philosophically just. The judgment and fancy are

reconciled, and the imagery of the poem seems to start more vividly from the surrounding shades of abstraction.

Such were some of the first and inferior luminaries of that brilliant era of our poetry, which, perhaps, in general terms, may be said to cover about the last quarter of the sixteenth, and the first quarter of the seventeenth century; and which, though commonly called the age of Elizabeth, comprehends many writers belonging to the reign of her successor. The romantic spirit, the generally unshackled style, and the fresh and fertile genius of that period, are not to be called in question. On the other hand, there are defects in the poetical character of the age, which, though they may disappear or be of little account, amidst the excellencies of its greatest writers, are glaringly conspicuous in the works of their minor contemporaries. In prolonged narrative and description the

writers of that age are peculiarly deficient in that charm, which is analogous to "*keeping*" in pictures. Their warm and cold colours are generally without the gradations which should make them harmonize. They fall precipitately from good to bad thoughts, from strength to imbecility. Certainly they are profuse in the detail of natural circumstances and in the utterance of natural feelings. For this we love them, and we should love them still more, if they knew where to stop in description and sentiment. But they give out the dregs of their mind without reserve, till their fairest conceptions are overwhelmed by a rabble of mean associations. At no period is the mass of vulgar mediocrity in poetry marked by more formal gallantry, by grosser adulation, or by coarser satire. Our amatory strains in the time of Charles the Second may be more dissolute, but those of Elizabeth's age often abound in

studious and prolix licentiousness. Nor are examples of this solemn and sedate impurity to be found only in the minor poets: our reverence for Shakespeare himself need not make it necessary to disguise that he willingly adopted that style in his youth, when he wrote his Venus and Adonis.

The fashion of the present day is to solicit public esteem not only for the best and better, but for the humblest and meanest writers of the age of Elizabeth. It is a bad book which has not something good in it; and even some of the worst writers of that period have their twinkling beauties. In one point of view, the research among such obscure authors is undoubtedly useful. It tends to throw incidental lights on the great old poets, and on the manners, biography, and language of the country. So far all is well—but as a matter of taste, it is apt to produce illusion and disappointment. Men

like to make the most of the slightest beauty, which they can discover in an obsolete versifier; and they quote perhaps the solitary good thought which is to be found in such a writer, omitting any mention of the dreary passages which surround it. Of course it becomes a lamentable reflection, that so valuable an old poet should have been forgotten. When the reader however repairs to him, he finds that there are only one or two grains of gold in all the sands of this imaginary Pactolus. But the display of neglected authors has not been even confined to glimmering beauties; it has been extended to the reprinting of large and heavy masses of dulness. Most wretched works have been praised in this enthusiasm for the obsolete; even the dullest works of the meanest contributors to the "Mirror for Magistrates." It seems to be taken for granted, that the inspiration of the good old times descended to

the very lowest dregs of its versifiers; whereas the bad writers of Elizabeth's age are only more stiff and artificial than those of the preceding, and more prolix than those of the succeeding period.

Yet there are men who, to all appearance, would wish to revive such authors —not for the mere use of the antiquary, to whom every volume *may* be useful, but as standards of manner, and objects of general admiration. Books, it is said, take up little room. In the library this may be the case; but it is not so in the minds and time of those who peruse them. Happily indeed, the task of pressing indifferent authors on the public attention is a fruitless one. They may be dug up from oblivion, but life cannot be put into their reputations. "Can these bones live?" Nature will have her course, and dull books will be forgotten in spite of bibliographers.

PART III.

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The pedantic character of James I. has been frequently represented as the cause of degeneracy in English taste and genius. It must be allowed that James was an indifferent author; and that neither the manners of his court nor the measures of his reign were calculated to excite romantic virtues in his subjects. But the opinion of his character having influenced the poetical spirit of the age unfavourably is not borne out by facts. He was friendly to the stage and to its best writers: he patronized Ben Jonson, and is said to have written a complimentary letter to Shakespeare with his own

hand[1]. We may smile at the idea of James's praise being bestowed as an honour upon Shakespeare; the importance of the compliment, however, is not to be estimated by our present opinion of the monarch but by the excessive reverence, with which royalty was at that time invested in men's opinions. James's reign was rich in poetical names, some of which have been already enumerated. We may be reminded, indeed, that those poets had been educated under Elizabeth, and that their genius bore the high impress of her heroic times; but the same observation will also oblige us to recollect that Elizabeth's age had its traits of depraved fashion (witness its Euphuism[2]), and that the first examples of the worst

[1] This anecdote is given by Oldys on the authority of the Duke of Buckingham, who had it from Sir William Davenant.

[2] An affected jargon of style, which was fashionable for some time at the court of Elizabeth, and so called from the work of Lyly entitled *Euphues*.

taste which ever infected our poetry were given in her days, and not in those of her successor. Donne (for instance) the patriarch of the metaphysical generation, was thirty years of age at the date of James's accession; a time at which his taste and style were sufficiently formed to acquit his learned sovereign of all blame in having corrupted them. Indeed, if we were to make the memories of our kings accountable for the poetical faults of their respective reigns, we might reproach Charles the First, among whose faults bad taste is certainly not to be reckoned, with the chief disgrace of our metaphysical poetry; since that school never attained its unnatural perfection so completely as in the luxuriant ingenuity of Cowley's fancy, and the knotted deformity of Cleveland's. For a short time after the suppression of the theatres till the time of Milton, the metaphysical poets are forced upon our attention for want of better objects. But during

James's reign there is no such scarcity of good writers as to oblige us to dwell on the school of elaborate conceit. Phineas Fletcher has been sometimes named as an instance of the vitiated taste which prevailed at this period. He, however, though musical and fanciful, is not to be admitted as a representative of the poetical character of those times, which included Jonson, Beaumont and John Fletcher, Ford, Massinger, and Shirley. Shakespeare was no more; but there were dramatic authors of great and diversified ability. The romantic school of the drama continued to be more popular than the classical, though in the latter Ben Jonson lived to see imitators of his own manner, whom he was not ashamed to adopt as his poetical heirs. Of these Cartwright and Randolph were the most eminent. The originality of Cartwright's plots is always acknowledged; and Jonson used to say of him, "*My son Cartwright writes all like a man.*"

Massinger is distinguished for the harmony and dignity of his dramatic eloquence. Many of his plots, it is true, are liable to heavy exceptions. The fiends and angels of his Virgin Martyr are unmanageable tragic machinery; and the incestuous passion of his Ancient Admiral excites our horror. The poet of love is driven to a frightful expedient, when he gives it the terrors of a maniac passion breaking down the most sacred pale of instinct and consanguinity. The ancient admiral is in love with his own daughter. Such a being, if we fancy him to exist, strikes us as no object of moral warning but as a man under the influence of insanity. In a general view, nevertheless, Massinger has more art and judgment in the serious drama than any of the other successors of Shakespeare. His incidents are less entangled than those of Fletcher, and the scene of his action is more clearly thrown open for the free evolution of character.

Fletcher strikes the imagination with more vivacity, but more irregularly, and amidst embarrassing positions of his own choosing. Massinger puts forth his strength more collectively. Fletcher has more action and character in his drama, and leaves a greater variety of impressions upon the mind. His fancy is more volatile and surprising, but then he often blends disappointment with our surprise, and parts with the consistency of his characters even to the occasionally apparent loss of their identity. This is not the case with Massinger. It is true that Massinger excels more in description and declamation than in the forcible utterance of the heart and in giving character the warm colouring of passion. Still, not to speak of his one distinguished hero[1] in comedy, he has delineated several tragic characters with strong and interesting

[1] Sir Giles Overreach.

traits. They are chiefly proud spirits. Poor himself, and struggling under the rich man's contumely, we may conceive it to have been the solace of his neglected existence to picture worth and magnanimity breaking through external disadvantages, and making their way to love and admiration. Hence his fine conceptions of Paris, the actor, exciting by the splendid endowments of his nature the jealousy of the tyrant of the world; and Don John and Pisander, habited as slaves, wooing and winning their princely mistresses. He delighted to shew heroic virtue stripped of all adventitious circumstances, and tried, like a gem, by its shining through darkness. His Duke of Milan is particularly admirable for the blended interest which the poet excites by the opposite weaknesses and magnanimity of the same character. Sforza, Duke of Milan, newly married and uxoriously attached to the haughty Marcelia, a woman of exquisite attractions, makes

her an object of secret but deadly enmity at his court, by the extravagant homage which he requires to be paid to her, and the precedence which he enjoins even his own mother and sisters to yield her. As Chief of Milan, he is attached to the fortunes of Francis the First. The sudden tidings of the approach of Charles the Fifth, in the campaign which terminated with the battle of Pavia, soon afterwards spread dismay through his court and capital. Sforza, though valiant and self-collected in all that regards the warrior or politician, is hurried away by his immoderate passion for Marcelia; and being obliged to leave her behind, but unable to bear the thoughts of her surviving him, obtains the promise of a confidant to destroy her, should his own death appear inevitable. He returns to his capital in safety. Marcelia, having discovered the secret order, receives him with coldness. His jealousy is inflamed; and her perception of that jealousy

alienates the haughty object of his affection, when she is on the point of reconcilement. The fever of Sforza's diseased heart is powerfully described, passing from the extreme of dotage to revenge, and returning again from thence to the bitterest repentance and prostration, when he has struck at the life which he most loved, and has made, when it is too late, the discovery of her innocence. Massinger always enforces this moral in love; —he punishes distrust, and attaches our esteem to the unbounded confidence of the passion. But while Sforza thus exhibits a warning against morbidly-selfish sensibility, he is made to appear, without violating probability, in all other respects a firm, frank, and prepossessing character. When his misfortunes are rendered desperate by the battle of Pavia, and when he is brought into the presence of Charles V., the intrepidity with which he pleads his cause disarms the resentment of his

conqueror; and the eloquence of the poet makes us expect that it should do so. Instead of palliating his zeal for the lost cause of Francis, he thus pleads—

I come not, Emperor, to invade thy mercy
By fawning on thy fortune, nor bring with me
Excuses or denials; I profess,
And with a good man's confidence, even this instant
That I am in thy power, I was thine enemy,
Thy deadly and vow'd enemy; one that wished
Confusion to thy person and estates,
And with my utmost power, and deepest counsels,
Had they been truly followed, further'd it.
Nor will I now, although my neck were under
The hangman's axe, with one poor syllable
Confess but that I honour'd the French king
More than thyself and all men.

After describing his obligations to Francis, he says—

He was indeed to me as my good angel,
To guard me from all danger. I dare speak,
Nay *must* and *will*, his praise now in as high
And loud a key as when he was thy equal.

The benefits he sow'd in me met not
Unthankful ground. * * * *
* * * * If then to be grateful
For benefits received, or not to leave
A friend in his necessities, be a crime
Amongst you Spaniards, Sforza brings his head
To pay the forfeit. Nor come I as a slave,
Pinion'd and fetter'd, in a squalid weed,
Falling before thy feet, kneeling and howling
For a forestall'd remission—that were poor,
And would but shame thy victory, for conquest
Over base foes is a captivity,
And not a triumph. I ne'er fear'd to die
More than I wish'd to live. When I had reach'd
My ends in being a Duke, I wore these robes,
This crown upon my head, and to my side
This sword was girt; and, witness truth, that now
'Tis in another's power, when I shall part
With life and them together, I'm the same—
My veins *then* did not swell with pride, nor *now*
Shrink they for fear.

If the vehement passions were not Massinger's happiest element, he expresses fixed principle with an air of authority. To make us feel the elevation of genuine pride was the master-key

which he knew how to touch in human sympathy; and his skill in it must have been derived from deep experience in his own bosom.

The theatre of Beaumont and Fletcher contains all manner of good and evil. The respective shares of those dramatic partners, in the works collectively published with their names, have been stated in a different part of these volumes. Fletcher's share in them is by far the largest; and he is chargeable with the greatest number of faults, although at the same time his genius was more airy, prolific, and fanciful. There are such extremes of grossness and magnificence in their drama, so much sweetness and beauty interspersed with views of nature either falsely romantic, or vulgar beyond reality; there is so much to animate and amuse us, and yet so much that we would willingly overlook, that I cannot help comparing the contrasted impressions which they make,

to those which we receive from visiting some great and ancient city, picturesquely but irregularly built, glittering with spires and surrounded with gardens, but exhibiting in many quarters the lanes and hovels of wretchedness. They have scenes of wealthy and high life which remind us of courts and palaces frequented by elegant females and high-spirited gallants, whilst their noble old martial characters, with Caractacus in the midst of them, may inspire us with the same sort of regard which we pay to the rough-hewn magnificence of an ancient fortress.

Unhappily, the same simile without being hunted down will apply but too faithfully to the *nuisances* of their drama. Their language is often basely profligate. Shakespeare's and Jonson's indelicacies are but casual blots; whilst theirs are sometimes essential colours of their painting, and extend, in one or two instances,

to entire and offensive scenes. This fault has deservedly injured their reputation; and, saving a very slight allowance for the fashion and taste of their age, admits of no sort of apology. Their drama, nevertheless, is a very wide one, and "*has ample room and verge enough*" to permit the attention to wander from these, and to fix on more inviting peculiarities—as on the great variety of their fables and personages, their spirited dialogue, their wit, pathos, and humour. Thickly sown as their blemishes are, their merit will bear great deductions, and still remain great. We never can forget such beautiful characters as their Cellide, their Aspatia and Bellario, or such humorous ones as their La Writ and Cacafogo. Awake they will always keep us, whether to quarrel or to be pleased with them. Their invention is fruitful; its beings are on the whole an active and sanguine generation, and their scenes are

crowded to fulness with the warmth, agitation, and interest of life.

In thus speaking of them together, it may be necessary to allude to the general and traditionary understanding, that Beaumont was the graver and more judicious genius of the two. Yet the plays in which he may be supposed to have assisted Fletcher, are by no means remarkable either for harmonious adjustment of parts, or scrupulous adherence to probability. In their Laws of Candy, the winding up of the plot is accomplished by a young girl commanding a whole bench of senators to descend from their judgment-seats, in virtue of an ancient law of the state which she discovers; and they obey her with the most polite alacrity. Cupid's Revenge is assigned to them conjointly, and is one of the very weakest of their worst class of pieces. On the other hand, Fletcher

produced his "Rule a Wife and have a Wife," after Beaumont's death, so that he was able, when he chose, to write with skill as well as spirit.

Of that skill, however, he is often so sparing as to leave his characters subject to the most whimsical metamorphoses. Sometimes they repent, like methodists, by instantaneous conversion. At other times they shift from good to bad, so as to leave us in doubt what they were meant for. In the tragedy of Valentinian we have a fine old soldier, Maximus, who sustains our affection through four acts, but in the fifth we are suddenly called upon to hate him, on being informed, by his own confession, that he is very wicked, and that all his past virtue has been but a trick on our credulity. The imagination, in this case, is disposed to take part with the creature of the poet's brain against the poet himself, and to think that

he maltreats and calumniates his own off-spring unnaturally[1]. But for these faults

[1] The most amusingly absurd perhaps of all Fletcher's bad plays, is the Island Princess. One might absolutely take it for a burlesque on the heroic drama, if its religious conclusion did not shew the author to be in earnest. Quisara, princess of the island of Tidore, where the Portuguese have a fort, offers her hand in marriage to any champion who shall deliver her brother, a captive of the governor of Ternata. Ruy Dias, her Portuguese lover, is shy of the adventure; but another lover, Armusia, hires a boat, with a few followers, which he hides, on landing at Tidore, among the reeds of the invaded island. He then disguises himself as a merchant, hires a cellar, like the Popish conspirators, and in the most credible manner blows up a considerable portion of a large town, rescues the king, slaughters all opposers, and re-embarks in his yawl from among the reeds. On his return he finds the lovely Quisara loth to fulfil her promise, from her being still somewhat attached to Ruy Dias. The base Ruy Dias sends his nephew, Piniero, to the Island Princess, with a project of assassinating Armusia; but Piniero, who is a merry fellow, thinks it better to prevent his uncle's crime and to make love for himself. Before

Fletcher makes good atonement, and has many affecting scenes. We must still

his introduction to the Princess, however, he meets with her aunt Quisana, to whom he talks abundance of ribaldry and *double entendre,* and so captivates the aged woman, that she exclaims to her attendant, "Pray thee let him talk still, for methinks he talks handsomely."—With the young lady he is equally successful, offers to murder any body she pleases, and gains her affections so far that she kisses him. The poor virtuous Armusia, in the mean time, determines to see his false Princess, makes his way to her chamber, and in spite of her reproaches and her late kiss to *Piniero,* at last makes a new impression on her heart. The dear Island Princess is in love a third time, in the third act. In the fourth act the king of Tidore, lately delivered by Armusia, plots against the Christians; he is accompanied by a Moorish priest, who is no other than the governor of Ternata, disguised in a false wig and beard; but his Tidorian majesty recollects his old enemy so imperfectly as to be completely deceived. This conspiracy alarms the Portuguese; the cowardly Ruy Dias all at once grows brave and generous; Quisara joins the Christians, and for the sake of Armusia and her new faith, offers to be burnt alive. Nothing remains

indeed say scenes; for, except in the "Faithful Shepherdess," which, unlike his usual manner, is very lulling, where shall we find him uniform? If "The Double Marriage" could be cleared of some revolting passages, the part of Juliana would not be unworthy of the powers of the finest tragic actress. Juliana is a high attempt to pourtray the saint and heroine blended in female character. When her husband Virolet's conspiracy against Ferrand of Naples is discovered, she endures and braves for his sake the most dreadful cruelties of the tyrant.

but to open the eyes of her brother, the king of Tidore. This is accomplished by the merry Piniero laying hold of the masqued governor's beard, which comes away without the assistance of a barber. The monarch exclaims that he cannot speak for astonishment, and every thing concludes agreeably. The Island Princess is not unlike some of the romantic dramas of Dryden's time; but the later play-writers superadded a style of outrageous rant and turgid imagery.

Virolet flies from his country, obliged to leave her behind him; and falling at sea into the hands of the pirate Duke of Sesse, saves himself and his associates from death, by consenting to marry the daughter of the pirate (Martia), who falls in love and elopes with him from her father's ship. As they carry off with them the son of Ferrand, who had been a prisoner of the Duke of Sesse, Virolet secures his peace being made at Naples; but when he has again to meet Juliana, he finds that he has purchased life too dearly. When the ferocious Martia, seeing his repentance, revenges herself by plotting his destruction, and when his divorced Juliana, forgetting her injuries, flies to warn and to save him, their interview has no common degree of interest. Juliana is perhaps rather a fine idol of the imagination than a probable type of nature; but poetry, which "accommodates the shews of things to

the desires of the mind[1]," has a right to the highest possible virtues of human character. And there have been women who have prized a husband's life above their own, and his honour above his life, and who have united the tenderness of their sex to heroic intrepidity. Such is Juliana, who thus exhorts the wavering fortitude of Virolet on the eve of his conspiracy.

Virolet. * * Unless our hands were cannon
To batter down his walls, our weak breath mines
To blow his forts up, or our curses lightning,
Our power is like to yours, and we, like you,
Weep our misfortunes. * * * *

She replies—

* * * Walls of brass resist not
A noble undertaking—nor can vice
Raise any bulwark to make good a place
Where virtue seeks to enter.

The joint dramas of Beaumont and Fletcher, entitled "Philaster" and the

[1] Expression of Lord Bacon's

" Maid's Tragedy," exhibit other captivating female portraits. The difficulty of giving at once truth, strength, and delicacy to female repentance for the loss of honour, is finely accomplished in Evadne. The stage has perhaps few scenes more affecting than that in which she obtains forgiveness of Amintor, on terms which interest us in his compassion, without compromising his honour. In the same tragedy[1], the plaintive image of the forsaken Aspatia has an indescribably sweet spirit and romantic expression. Her fancy takes part with her heart, and gives its sorrow a visionary gracefulness. When she finds her maid Antiphila working a picture of Ariadne, she tells her to copy the likeness from herself, from " the lost Aspatia."

Asp. But where's the lady?

Ant. There, Madam.

Asp. Fie, you have miss'd it here, Antiphila;
These colours are not dull and pale enough,

[1] The Maid's Tragedy.

To shew a soul so full of misery
As this sad lady's was. Do it by me—
Do it again by me, the lost Aspatia,
And you shall find all true. Put me on the wild
island.
I stand upon the sea-beach now, and think
Mine arms thus, and my hair blown by the wind
Wild as that desert, and let all about me
Be teachers of my story. * * *
* * * * Strive to make me look
Like Sorrow's monument, and the trees about me,
Let them be dry and leafless; let the rocks
Groan with continual surges, and behind me
Make all a desolation. See, see, wenches,
A miserable life of this poor picture.

The resemblance of this poetical picture to Guido's Bacchus and Ariadne has been noticed by Mr. Seward in the preface to his edition of Beaumont and Fletcher. In both representations the extended arms of the mourner, her hair blown by the wind, the barren roughness of the rocks around her, and the broken trunks of leafless trees, make her figure appear like Sorrow's monument.

Their masculine characters in tragedy are generally much less interesting than their females. Some exceptions may be found to this remark; particularly in the British chief Caractacus and his interesting nephew, the boy Hengo. With all the faults of the tragedy of Bonduca, its British subject and its native heroes attach our hearts. We follow Caractacus to battle and captivity with a proud satisfaction in his virtue. The stubbornness of the old soldier is finely tempered by his wise, just, and candid respect for his enemies the Romans, and by his tender affection for his princely ward. He never gives way to sorrow till he looks on the dead body of his nephew Hengo, when he thus exclaims—

* * * Farewell the hopes of Britain!
Farewell thou royal graft for ever! Time and Death,
Ye have done your worst. Fortune, now see, now proudly
Pluck off thy veil, and view thy triumph.

*   *   *   *   * O fair flower,
How lovely yet thy ruins shew—how sweetly
Ev'n Death embraces thee! The peace of heaven,
The fellowship of all great souls, go with thee!

The character must be well supported which yields a sensation of triumph in the act of surrendering to victorious enemies. Caractacus does not need to tell us, that when a brave man has done his duty, he cannot be humbled by fortune—but he makes us feel it in his behaviour. The few brief and simple sentences which he utters in submitting to the Romans, together with their respectful behaviour to him, give a sublime composure to his appearance in the closing scene.

Dryden praises the gentlemen of Beaumont and Fletcher in comedy as the true men of fashion of "the times." It was necessary that Dryden should call them the men of fashion of the times, for they are not in the highest sense of the word gentlemen. Shirley's comic characters

have much more of the conversation and polite manners, which we should suppose to belong to superior life in all ages and countries. The genteel characters of Fletcher form a narrower class, and exhibit a more particular image of their times and country. But their comic personages, after all, are a spirited race. In one province of the facetious drama they set the earliest example; witness their humorous mock-heroic comedy, the Knight of the burning Pestle.

The memory of Ford has been deservedly revived as one of the ornaments of our ancient drama; though he has no great body of poetry, and has interested us in no other passion except that of love; but in that he displays a peculiar depth and delicacy of romantic feeling. Webster has a gloomy force of imagination, not unmixed with the beautiful and pathetic. But it is "beauty in the lap of horror:" he caricatures the shapes of terror, and his Pegasus is like a night-

mare. Middleton[1], Marston, Thos. Heywood, Decker, and Chapman, also present subordinate claims to remembrance in that fertile period of the drama.

Shirley was the last of our good old dramatists. When his works shall be given to the public, they will undoubtedly enrich our popular literature. His language sparkles with the most exquisite images. Keeping some occasional pruriencies apart, the fault of his age rather than of himself, he speaks the most polished and refined dialect of the stage; and even some of his over-heightened scenes of voluptuousness are meant,

[1] Middleton's hags, in the tragi-comedy of the Witch, were conjectured by Mr. Steevens to have given the hint to Shakespeare of his witches in Macbeth. It has been repeatedly remarked, however, that the resemblance scarcely extends beyond a few forms of incantation. The hags of Middleton are merely mischievous old women, those of Shakespeare influence the elements of nature and the destinies of man.

though with a very mistaken judgment, to inculcate morality[1]. I consider his genius, indeed, as rather brilliant and elegant than strong or lofty. His tragedies are defective in fire, grandeur, and passion; and we must *select* his comedies, to have any favourable idea of his humour. His finest poetry comes forth in situations rather more familiar than tragedy and more grave than comedy, which I should call sentimental comedy, if the name were not associated with ideas of modern insipidity. That he was capable, however, of pure and excellent comedy will be felt by those, who have yet in reserve the amusement of reading his Gamester, Hyde-park, and Lady of Pleasure. In the first and last

[1] The scene in Shirley's Love's Cruelty, for example, between Hippolito and the object of his admiration, Act IV. Scene i. and another in the Grateful Servant, between Belinda and Lodwick. Several more might be mentioned.

of these there is a subtle ingenuity in producing comic effect and surprise, which might be termed attic, if it did not surpass any thing that is left us in Athenian comedy.

I shall leave to others the more special enumeration of his faults, only observing, that the airy touches of his expression, the delicacy of his sentiments, and the beauty of his similes, are often found where the poet survives the dramatist, and where he has not power to transfuse life and strong individuality through the numerous characters of his voluminous drama. His style, to use a line of his own, is "studded like a frosty night with stars;" and a severe critic might say, that the stars often shine when the atmosphere is rather too frosty. In other words, there is more beauty of fancy than strength of feeling in his works. From this remark, however, a defender of his fame might justly appeal to ex-

ceptions in many of his pieces. From a general impression of his works I should not paint his Muse with the haughty form and features of inspiration, but with a countenance, in its happy moments, arch, lovely, and interesting both in smiles and in tears; crowned with flowers, and not unindebted to ornament, but wearing the drapery and chaplet with a claim to them from natural beauty. Of his style I subjoin one or two more examples, lest I may not have done justice to him in that respect in the body of the work.

CLEONA INFORMED BY THE PAGE DULCINO OF FOSCARI, WHOM SHE HAD THOUGHT DEAD, BEING STILL ALIVE.

FROM THE GRATEFUL SERVANT.

Cleona. The day breaks glorious to my darken'd thoughts.
He lives, he lives yet! cease, ye amorous fears,
More to perplex me. Prithee speak, sweet youth:
How fares my lord? Upon my virgin heart
I'll build a flaming altar, to offer up .

A thankful sacrifice for his return
To life and me. Speak, and increase my comforts.
Is he in perfect health?
Dulcino. Not perfect, Madam,
Until you bless him with the knowledge of
Your constancy.—
Cleon. O get thee wings and fly then:
Tell him my love doth burn like vestal fire,
Which with his memory, richer than all spices,
Dispersed odours round about my soul,
And did refresh it, when 'twas dull and sad,
With thinking of his absence——
-Yet stay,
Thou goest away too soon; where is he? speak.
Dul. He gave me no commission for that, lady;
He will soon save that question by his presence.
Cleon. Time has no feathers—he walks now on crutches.—
Relate his gestures when he gave thee this.
What other words?—Did mirth smile on his brow?
I would not, for the wealth of this great world,
He should suspect my faith. What said he, prithee?
Dul. He said what a warm lover, when desire
Makes eloquent, could speak—he said you were
Both star and pilot.
Cleon. The sun's lov'd flower, that shuts his yellow curtain
When he declineth, opens it again

At his fair rising: with my parting lord
I clos'd all my delight—till his approach
It shall not spread itself.

FOSCARI, IN HIS MELANCHOLY, ANNOUNCING TO FATHER VALENTIO HIS RESOLUTION TO BECOME A MONK.

FROM THE SAME.

Foscari. There is a sun ten times more glorious
Than that which rises in the east, attracts me
To feed upon his sweet beams, and become
A bird of Paradise, a religious man,
To rise from earth, and no more to turn back
But for a burial.
Valentio. My lord, the truth is, like your coat of arms,
Richest when plainest. I do fear the world
Hath tired you, and you seek a cell to rest in:
As birds that wing it o'er the sea, seek ships
Till they get breath, and then they fly away.

THE DUKE OF FLORENCE TO HIS MURDERER, LORENZO.

FROM THE TRAITOR.

* * * For thee, inhuman murderer, expect
My blood shall fly to Heaven, and there enflamed,
Hang a prodigious meteor all thy life:
And when, by some as bloody hand as thine,

Thy soul is ebbing forth, it shall descend,
In flaming drops, upon thee. O! I faint!
Thou flattering world, farewell. Let princes gather
My dust into a glass, and learn to spend
Their hour of state—that's all they have—for when
That's out, Time never turns the glass again.

FROM THE SAME.

* * When our souls shall leave this dwelling,
The glory of one fair and virtuous action
Is above all the scutcheons on our tomb,
Or silken banners over us.

FERNANDO DESCRIBING HIS MISTRESS TO FRANCISCO.

FROM THE COMEDY OF THE BROTHERS.

Fern. You have, then, a mistress,
And thrive upon her favours——but thou art
My brother: I'll deliver thee a secret:
I was at St. Sebastian's, last Sunday,
At vespers.
Fran. Is it a secret that you went to church?
You need not blush to tell 't your ghostly father.
Fern. I prithee leave thy impertinence: there I saw
So sweet a face, so harmless, so intent
Upon her prayers; it frosted my devotion

To gaze upon her, till by degrees I took
Her fair idea, through my covetous eyes,
Into my heart, and know not how to ease
It since of the impression.

* * * * * * *

Her eye did seem to labour with a tear,
Which suddenly took birth, but, overweigh'd
With its own swelling, dropp'd upon her bosom,
Which, by reflection of her light, appear'd
As Nature meant her sorrow for an ornament.
After, her looks grew cheerful, and I saw
A smile shoot graceful upward from her eyes,
As if they had gained a victory o'er grief;
And with it many beams twisted themselves,
Upon whose golden threads the angels walk
To and again from heaven.

The contempt which Dryden expresses for Shirley might surprise us, if it were not recollected that he lived in a degenerate age of dramatic taste, and that his critical sentences were neither infallible nor immutable. He at one time undervalued Otway, though he lived to alter his opinion.

The civil wars put an end to this

dynasty of our dramatic poets. Their immediate successors or contemporaries, belonging to the reign of Charles I., many of whom resumed their lyres after the interregnum, may, in a general view, be divided into the classical and metaphysical schools. The former class, containing Denham, Waller, and Carew, upon the whole, cultivated smooth and distinct melody of numbers, correctness of imagery, and polished elegance of expression. The latter, in which Herrick and Cowley stood at the head of Donne's metaphysical followers, were generally loose or rugged in their versification, and preposterous in their metaphors. But this distinction can only be drawn in very general terms; for Cowley, the prince of the metaphysicians, has bursts of natural feeling and just thoughts in the midst of his absurdities. And Herrick, who is equally whimsical, has left some little gems of highly-finished

composition. On the other hand, the correct Waller is sometimes metaphysical; and ridiculous hyperboles are to be found in the elegant style of Carew.

The characters of Denham, Waller, and Cowley, have been often described. Had Cowley written nothing but his prose, it would have stamped him a man of genius, and an improver of our language. Of his poetry Rochester indecorously said, that "not being of God, it could not stand." Had the word *nature* been substituted, it would have equally conveyed the intended meaning, but still that meaning would not have been strictly just. There is much in Cowley that will stand. He teems, in many places, with the imagery, the feeling, the grace and gaiety of a poet. Nothing but a severer judgment was wanting to collect the scattered lights of his fancy. His unnatural flights arose less from affectation than self-deception. He che-

rished false thoughts as men often associate with false friends, not from insensibility to the difference between truth and falsehood but from being too indolent to examine the difference. Herrick, if we were to fix our eyes on a small portion of his works, might be pronounced a writer of delightful Anacreontic spirit. He has passages where the thoughts seem to dance into numbers from his very heart, and where he frolics like a being made up of melody and pleasure; as when he sings—

> Gather the rose-buds while ye may,
> Old Time is still a flying;
> And that same flower that blooms to-day,
> To-morrow shall be dying.

In the same spirit are his verses to Anthaea, concluding—

> Thou art my life, my love, my heart,
> The very eyes of me;
> And hast command of every part,
> To live and die for thee.

But his beauties are so deeply involved in surrounding coarseness and extravagance, as to constitute not a tenth part of his poetry, or rather it may be safely affirmed, that of 1400 pages of verse, which he has left, not an hundred are worth reading.

In Milton there may be traced obligations to several minor English poets ; but his genius had too great a supremacy to belong to any school. Though he acknowledged a filial reverence for Spenser as a poet, he left no Gothic irregular tracery in the design of his own great work, but gave a classical harmony of parts to its stupendous pile. It thus resembles a dome, the vastness of which is at first sight concealed by its symmetry, but which expands more and more to the eye while it is contemplated. His early poetry seems to have neither disturbed nor corrected the bad taste of his age. Comus came into the world unacknow-

ledged by its author, and Lycidas appeared at first only with his initials. These, and other exquisite pieces, composed in the happiest years of his life, at his father's country-house at Horton, were collectively published, with his name affixed to them, in 1645; but that precious volume, which included L'Allegro and Il Penseroso, did not (I believe) come to a second edition, till it was republished by himself at the distance of eight and twenty years. Almost a century elapsed before his minor works obtained their proper fame. Handel's music is said, by Dr. Warton, to have drawn the first attention to them; but they must have been admired before Handel set them to music; for he was assuredly not the first to discover their beauty. But of Milton's poetry being above the comprehension of his age, we should have a sufficient proof, if we had no other, in the grave remark of

Lord Clarendon, that Cowley had, in his time, "*taken a flight above all men in poetry.*" Even when Paradise Lost appeared, though it was not neglected, it attracted no crowd of imitators, and made no visible change in the poetical practice of the age. He stood alone, and aloof above his times, the bard of immortal subjects, and, as far as there is perpetuity in language, of immortal fame. The very choice of those subjects bespoke a contempt for any species of excellence that was attainable by other men. There is something that overawes the mind in conceiving his long deliberated selection of that theme—his attempting it when his eyes were shut upon the face of nature—his dependance, we might almost say, on supernatural inspiration, and in the calm air of strength with which he opens Paradise Lost, beginning a mighty performance without the appearance of an effort. Taking the subject all in all, his

powers could nowhere else have enjoyed the same scope. It was only from the height of this great argument that he could look back upon eternity past, and forward upon eternity to come, that he could survey the abyss of infernal darkness, open visions of Paradise, or ascend to heaven and breathe empyreal air. Still the subject had precipitous difficulties. It obliged him to relinquish the warm, multifarious interests of human life. For these indeed he could substitute holier things; but a more insuperable objection to the theme was, that it involved the representation of a war between the Almighty and his created beings. To the vicissitudes of such a warfare it was impossible to make us attach the same fluctuations of hope and fear, the same curiosity, suspense, and sympathy, which we feel amidst the battles of the Iliad, and which make every brave

young spirit long to be in the midst of them.

Milton has certainly triumphed over one difficulty of his subject, the paucity and the loneliness of its human agents; for no one in contemplating the garden of Eden would wish to exchange it for a more populous world. His earthly pair could only be represented, during their innocence, as beings of simple enjoyment and negative virtue, with no other passions than the fear of heaven, and the love of each other. Yet from these materials what a picture has he drawn of their homage to the Deity, their mutual affection, and the horrors of their alienation! By concentrating all exquisite ideas of external nature in the representation of their abode—by conveying an inspired impression of their spirits and forms, whilst they first shone under the fresh light of creative heaven—by

these powers of description, he links our first parents, in harmonious subordination, to the angelic natures—he supports them in the balance of poetical importance with their divine coadjutors and enemies, and makes them appear at once worthy of the friendship and envy of gods.

In the angelic warfare of the poem Milton has done whatever human genius could accomplish. But, although Satan speaks of having " put to proof his (Maker's) high supremacy, in dubious battle, on the plains of heaven," the expression, though finely characteristic of his blasphemous pride, does not prevent us from feeling that the battle cannot for a moment be dubious. Whilst the powers of description and language are taxed and exhausted to pourtray the combat, it is impossible not to feel with regard to the blessed spirits, a profound and reposing security that they have

neither great dangers to fear, nor reverses to suffer. At the same time it must be said that, although in the actual contact of the armies the inequality of the strife becomes strongly visible to the imagination, and makes it a contest more of noise than terror; yet while positive action is suspended, there is a warlike grandeur in the poem, which is nowhere to be paralleled. When Milton's genius dares to invest the Almighty himself with arms, "his bow and thunder," the astonished mind admits the image with a momentary credence. It is otherwise when we are involved in the circumstantial details of the campaign. We have then leisure to anticipate its only possible issue, and can feel no alarm for any temporary check that may be given to those who fight under the banners of Omnipotence. The warlike part of Paradise Lost was inseparable from its subject. Whether it could have been differently managed, is a problem

which our reverence for Milton will scarcely permit us to state. I feel that reverence too strongly to suggest even the possibility that Milton could have improved his poem, by having thrown his angelic warfare into more remote perspective; but it seems to me to be most sublime when it is least distinctly brought home to the imagination. What an awful effect has the dim and undefined conception of the conflict, which we gather from the opening of the first book! There the veil of mystery is left undrawn between us and a subject, which the powers of description were inadequate to exhibit. The ministers of divine vengeance and pursuit had been recalled—the thunders had ceased

"To bellow through the vast and boundless deep,"

(in that line what an image of sound and space is conveyed!)—and our terrific conception of the past is deepened by its

indistinctness. In optics there are some phenomena which are beautifully deceptive at a certain distance, but which lose their illusive charm on the slightest approach to them, that changes the light and position in which they are viewed. Something like this takes place in the phenomena of fancy. The array of the fallen angels in hell—the unfurling of the standard of Satan—and the march of his troops

"In perfect phalanx, to the Dorian mood
"Of flutes and soft recorders"—

all this human pomp and circumstance of war—is magic and overwhelming illusion. The imagination is taken by surprise. But the noblest efforts of language are tried with very unequal effect to interest us, in the immediate and close view of the battle itself in the sixth book; and the martial demons, who charmed us in the shades of hell, lose some portion

of their sublimity, when their artillery is discharged in the day-light of heaven.

If we call diction the garb of thought, Milton, in his style, may be said to wear the costume of sovereignty. The idioms even of foreign languages contributed to adorn it. He was the most learned of poets; yet his learning interferes not with his substantial English purity. His simplicity is unimpaired by glowing ornament, like the bush in the sacred flame, which burnt but "was not consumed."

In delineating the blessed spirits Milton has exhausted all the conceivable variety that could be given to pictures of unshaded sanctity; but it is chiefly in those of the fallen angels that his excellence is conspicuous above every thing ancient or modern. Tasso had, indeed, pourtrayed an infernal council, and had given the hint to our poet of ascribing the origin of pagan worship to those reprobate spirits. But how poor and

squalid in comparison of the Miltonic Pandæmonium are the Scyllas, the Cyclopses, and the Chimeras of the Infernal Council of the Jerusalem! Tasso's conclave of fiends is a den of ugly incongruous monsters.

O come strane, o come orribil forme!
Quant è negli occhi lor terror, e morte!
Stampano alcuni il suol di ferine orme
E'n fronte umana han chiome d' angui attorte
E lor s'aggira dietro immensa loda
Che quasi sferza si ripiega, e snoda.
Qui mille immonde Arpie vedresti, e mille
Centauri, e Sfingi, e pallide Gorgoni,
Molte e molte latrar voraci Scille
E fischiar Idre, e sibilar Pitoni,
E vomitar Chimere atre faville
E Polifemi orrendi, e Gerioni.
* * * * * * *

La Gerusalemme, Canto IV.

The powers of Milton's hell are godlike shapes and forms. Their appearance dwarfs every other poetical conception, when we turn our dilated eyes from contemplating them. It is not their external

attributes alone which expand the imagination, but their souls, which are as colossal as their stature—their "*thoughts that wander through eternity*"—the pride that burns amidst the ruins of their divine natures, and their genius, that feels with the ardour and debates with the eloquence of heaven.

The subject of Paradise Lost was the origin of evil—an era in existence—an event more than all others dividing past from future time—an isthmus in the ocean of eternity. The theme was in its nature connected with every thing important in the circumstances of human history; and amidst these circumstances Milton saw that the fables of Paganism were too important and poetical to be omitted. As a Christian, he was entitled wholly to neglect them; but as a poet, he chose to treat them, not as dreams of the human mind but as the delusions of infernal existences. Thus anticipating a

beautiful propriety for all classical allusions, thus connecting and reconciling the co-existence of fable and of truth, and thus identifying the fallen angels with the deities of "gay religions, full of pomp and gold," he yoked the heathen mythology in triumph to his subject, and clothed himself in the spoils of superstition.

One eminent production of wit, namely, Hudibras, may be said to have sprung out of the Restoration, or at least out of the contempt of fanaticism, which had its triumph in that event; otherwise, the return of royalty contributed as little to improve the taste as the morality of the public. The drama degenerated, owing, as we are generally told, to the influence of French literature, although some infection from the Spanish stage might also be taken into the account. Sir William Davenant, who presided over the first revival of the theatre, was a man of cold

and didactic spirit; he created an era in the machinery, costume, and ornaments of the stage, but he was only fitted to be its mechanical benefactor. Dryden, who could do even bad things with a good grace, confirmed the taste for rhyming and ranting tragedy. Two beautiful plays of Otway formed an exception to this degeneracy; but Otway was cut off in the spring-tide of his genius, and his early death was, according to every appearance, a heavy loss to our drama. It has been alleged, indeed, in the present day, that Otway's imagination shewed no prognostics of great future achievements; but when I remember Venice Preserved and the Orphan, as the works of a man of thirty, I can treat this opinion no otherwise than to dismiss it as an idle assertion.

Βάσκ' ἴθι, οὖλε Ὄνειρε.

During the last thirty years of the seventeenth century, Dryden was seldom

long absent from the view of the public, and he alternately swayed and humoured its predilections. Whatever may be said of his accommodating and fluctuating theories of criticism, his perseverance in training and disciplining his own faculties is entitled to much admiration. He strengthened his mind by action, and fertilized it by production. In his old age he renewed his youth, like the eagle; or rather his genius acquired stronger wings than it had ever spread. He rose and fell, it is true, in the course of his poetical career; but upon the whole it was a career of improvement to the very last. Even in the drama, which was not his natural province, his good sense came at last so far in aid of his deficient sensibility, that he gave up his system of rhyming tragedy, and adopted Shakespeare (in theory at least) for his model. In poetry not belonging to the drama, he was at first an admirer of Cowley, then of Davenant; and ultimately he acquired a manner

above the peculiarities of either. The odes and fables of his latest volume surpass whatever he had formerly written. He was satirized and abused as well as extolled by his contemporaries; but his genius was neither to be discouraged by the severity, nor spoilt by the favour of criticism. It flourished alike in the sunshine and the storm, and its fruits improved as they multiplied in profusion. When we view him out of the walk of purely original composition, it is not a paradox to say, that though he is one of the greatest artists in language, and perhaps the greatest of English translators, he nevertheless attempted one task in which his failure is at least as conspicuous as his success. But that task was the translation of Virgil. And it is not lenity, but absolute justice, that requires us to make a very large and liberal allowance, for whatever deficiencies he may shew in transfusing into a language less har-

monious and flexible than the Latin, the sense of that poet, who, in the history of the world, has had no rival in beauty of expression. Dryden renovates Chaucer's thoughts, and fills up Boccaccio's narrative outline with many improving touches: and though paraphrase suited his free spirit better than translation, yet even in versions of Horace and Juvenal he seizes the classical character of Latin poetry with a boldness and dexterity which are all his own. But it was easier for him to emulate the strength of Juvenal than the serene majesty of Virgil. His translation of Virgil is certainly an inadequate representation of the Roman poet. It is often bold and graceful, and generally idiomatic and easy. But though the spirit of the original is not lost, it is sadly and unequally diffused. Nor is it only in the magic of words, in the exquisite structure and rich economy of expression, that

Dryden (as we might expect) falls beneath Virgil, but we too often feel the inequality of his vital sensibility as a poet. Too frequently, when the Roman classic touches the heart, or embodies to our fancy those noble images to which nothing could be added, and from which nothing can be taken away, we are sensible of the distance between Dryden's talent, and Virgil's inspiration. One passage out of many, the representation of Jupiter in the first book of the Georgics, may shew this difference.

GEORGICS, LIB. I. L. 328.

Ipse Pater, mediâ nimborum in nocte, corusca
Fulmina molitur dextrâ : quo maxima motu
Terra tremit, fugere feræ, et mortalia corda
Per gentes humilis stravit pavor——

The father of the Gods his glory shrouds,
Involved in tempests and a night of clouds,
And from the middle darkness flashing out,
By fits he deals his fiery bolts about.

Earth feels the motion of her angry God,
Her entrails tremble, and her mountains nod,
And flying beasts in forests seek abode:
Deep horror seizes every human breast,
Their pride is humbled, and their fear confessed.

Virgil's three lines and a half might challenge the most sublime pencil of Italy to the same subject. His words are no sooner read than, with the rapidity of light, they collect a picture before the mind which stands confessed in all its parts. There is no interval between the objects as they are presented to our perception. At one and the same moment we behold the form, the uplifted arm, and dazzling thunderbolts of Jove, amidst a night of clouds;—the earth trembling, and the wild beasts scudding for shelter —*fugere*—they have vanished while the poet describes them, and we feel that mortal hearts are laid prostrate with fear, throughout the nations. Dryden, in the translation, has done his best, and some

of his lines roll on with spirit and dignity, but the whole description is a process rather than a picture——the instantaneous effect, the electric unity of the original, is lost. Jupiter has leisure to deal out his fiery bolts by fits, while the entrails of the earth shake, and her mountains nod, and the flying beasts have time to look out very quietly for lodgings in the forest. The weakness of the two last lines, which stand for the weighty words, "*Mortalia corda per gentes humilis stravit pavor*," need not be pointed out.

I cannot quote this passage without recurring to the recollection, already suggested, that it was Virgil with whom the English translator had to contend. Dryden's admirers might undoubtedly quote many passages much more in his favour; and one passage occurs to me as a striking example of his felicity. In the following lines (with the exception of one) we recognize a great poet, and

can scarcely acknowledge that he is translating a greater.

ÆNEID, LIB. XII. L. 331.

Qualis apud gelidi cum flumina concitus Hebri
Sanguineus Mavors clipeo intonat[1] atque furentes
Bella movens immittit equos, illi æquore aperto
Ante Notos Zephyrumque volant, gemit ultima pulsu
Thraca pedum, circumque atræ Formidinis ora,
Ira, insidiæque, Dei comitatus aguntur——

Thus, on the banks of Hebrus' freezing flood,
The god of battles, in his angry mood,
Clashing his sword against his brazen shield,
Lets loose the reins, and scours along the field:
Before the wind his fiery coursers fly,
Groans the sad earth, resounds the rattling sky;
Wrath, terror, treason, tumult and despair,
Dire faces and deformed, surround the car,
Friends of the God, and followers of the war.

If it were asked how far Dryden can strictly be called an inventive poet, his drama certainly would not furnish many

[1] *Intonat.*—I follow Wakefield's edition of Virgil in preference to others which have "*increpat.*"

instances of characters strongly designed; though his Spanish Friar is by no means an insipid personage in comedy. The contrivance in the Hind and Panther of beasts disputing about religion, if it were his own, would do little honour to his ingenuity. The idea, in Absalom and Achitophel, of couching modern characters under scripture names, was adopted from one of the Puritan writers; yet there is so much ingenuity evinced in supporting the parallel, and so admirable a gallery of portraits displayed in the work, as to render that circumstance insignificant with regard to its originality. Nor, though his fables are borrowed, can we regard him with much less esteem than if he had been their inventor. He is a writer of manly and elastic character. His strong judgment gave force as well as direction, to a flexible fancy; and his harmony is generally the echo of

solid thoughts. But he was not gifted with intense or lofty sensibility; on the contrary, the grosser any idea is, the happier he seems to expatiate upon it. The transports of the heart, and the deep and varied delineations of the passions, are strangers to his poetry. He could describe character in the abstract, but could not embody it in the drama, for he entered into character more from clear perception than fervid sympathy. This great High Priest of all the Nine was not a confessor to the finer secrets of the human breast. Had the subject of Eloisa fallen into his hands, he would have left but a coarse draught of her passion.

Dryden died in the last year of the seventeenth century. In the intervening period between his death and the meridian of Pope's reputation, we may be kept in good humour with the archness of Prior, and the wit of Swift. Parnell

was the most elegant rhymist of Pope's early contemporaries; and Rowe, if he did not bring back the full fire of the drama, at least preserved its vestal spark from being wholly extinguished. There are exclusionists in taste, who think that they cannot speak with sufficient disparagement of the English poets of the first part of the eighteenth century; and they are armed with a noble provocative to English contempt, when they have it to say, that those poets belong to a French school. Indeed Dryden himself is generally included in that school; though more genuine English is to be found in no man's pages. But in poetry "there are many mansions." I am free to confess, that I can pass from the elder writers, and still find a charm in the correct and equable sweetness of Parnell. Conscious that his diction has not the freedom and volubility of the better strains of the

elder time, I cannot but remark his exemption from the quaintness and false metaphor which so often disfigure the style of the preceding age; nor deny my respect to the select choice of his expression, the clearness and keeping of his imagery, and the pensive dignity of his moral feeling.

Pope gave our heroic couplet its strictest melody and tersest expression.

D'un mot mis en sa place il enseigne le pouvoir.

If his contemporaries forgot other poets in admiring him, let him not be robbed of his just fame on pretence that a part of it was superfluous. The public ear was long fatigued with repetitions of his manner; but if we place ourselves in the situation of those to whom his brilliancy, succinctness, and animation were wholly new, we cannot wonder at their being captivated to the fondest admiration. In

order to do justice to Pope, we should forget his imitators, if that were possible; but it is easier to remember than to forget by an effort—to acquire associations than to shake them off. Every one may recollect how often the most beautiful air has palled upon his ear, and grown insipid from being played or sung by vulgar musicians. It is the same thing with regard to Pope's versification. That his peculiar rhythm and manner are the very best in the whole range of our poetry need not be asserted. He has a gracefully peculiar manner, though it is not calculated to be an universal one; and where, indeed, shall we find the style of poetry that could be pronounced an exclusive model for every composer? His pauses have little variety, and his phrases are too much weighed in the balance of antithesis. But let us look to the spirit that points his antithesis, and to the rapid precision of his thoughts,

and we shall forgive him for being too antithetic and sententious.

Pope's works have been twice given to the world by editors who cannot be taxed with the slightest editorial partiality towards his fame. The last of these is the Rev. Mr. Bowles, in speaking of whom I beg leave most distinctly to disclaim the slightest intention of undervaluing his acknowledged merit as a poet, however freely and fully I may dissent from his critical estimate of the genius of Pope. Mr. Bowles, in forming this estimate, lays great stress upon the argument, that Pope's images are drawn from art more than from nature. That Pope was neither so insensible to the beauties of nature, nor so indistinct in describing them as to forfeit the character of a genuine poet, is what I mean to urge, without exaggerating his picturesqueness. But before speaking of that quality in his

writings, I would beg leave to observe, in the first place, that the faculty by which a poet luminously describes objects of art, is essentially the same faculty, which enables him to be a faithful describer of simple nature; in the second place, that nature and art are to a greater degree relative terms in poetical description than is generally recollected; and, thirdly, that artificial objects and manners are of so much importance in fiction, as to make the exquisite description of them no less characteristic of genius than the description of simple physical appearances. The poet is "creation's heir." He deepens our social interest in existence. It is surely by the liveliness of the interest which he excites in existence, and not by the class of subjects which he chooses, that we most fairly appreciate the genius or the life of life which is in him. It is no irreverence to the

external charms of nature to say, that they are not more important to a poet's study, than the manners and affections of his species. Nature is the poet's goddess; but by nature, no one rightly understands her mere inanimate face—however charming it may be—or the simple landscape painting of trees, clouds, precipices, and flowers. Why then try Pope, or any other poet, exclusively by his powers of describing inanimate phenomena? Nature, in the wide and proper sense of the word, means life in all its circumstances—nature moral as well as external. As the subject of inspired fiction, nature includes artificial forms and manners. Richardson is no less a painter of nature than Homer. Homer himself is a minute describer of works of art; and Milton is full of imagery derived from it. Satan's spear is compared to the pine that makes "the mast of some

"great ammiral," and his shield is like the moon, but like the moon artificially seen through the glass of the Tuscan artist. The "spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing "fife, the royal banner, and all quality, "pride, pomp, and circumstance of glo- "rious war," are all artificial images. When Shakespeare groups into one view the most sublime objects of the universe, he fixes first on "the cloud-capt towers, "the gorgeous palaces, the solemn tem- "ples." Those who have ever witnessed the spectacle of the launching of a ship of the line, will perhaps forgive me for adding this to the examples of the sublime objects of artificial life. Of that spectacle I can never forget the impression, and of having witnessed it reflected from the faces of ten thousand spectators. They seem yet before me—I sympathise with their deep and silent expectation, and with their final burst of enthusiasm. It

was not a vulgar joy, but an affecting national solemnity. When the vast bulwark sprang from her cradle, the calm water on which she swung majestically round gave the imagination a contrast of the stormy element on which she was soon to ride. All the days of battle and the nights of danger which she had to encounter, all the ends of the earth which she had to visit, and all that she had to do and to suffer for her country, rose in awful presentiment before the mind; and when the heart gave her a benediction, it was like one pronounced on a living being.

Pope, while he is a great moral writer, though not elaborately picturesque, is by no means deficient as a painter of interesting external objects. No one will say that he peruses Eloisa's Epistle without a solemn impression of the pomp of catholic superstition. In familiar descrip-

tion, nothing can be more distinct and agreeable than his lines on the Man of Ross, when he asks,

Whose causeway parts the vale with shady rows?
Whose seats the weary traveller repose?
Who taught that heav'n-directed spire to rise?
The Man of Ross, each lisping babe replies.
Behold the market-place with poor o'erspread—
The Man of Ross divides the weekly bread:
He feeds yon alms-house, neat, but void of state,
Where Age and Want sit smiling at the gate:
Him portion'd maids, apprentic'd orphans blest,
The young who labour, and the old who rest

Nor is he without observations of animal nature, in which every epithet is a decisive touch, as,

From the green myriads in the peopled grass,
What modes of sight betwixt each wide extreme,
The mole's dim curtain, and the lynx's beam;
Of smell, the *headlong* lioness between
And hound sagacious, on the tainted green;

Of hearing, from the life that fills the flood,
To that which warbles through the vernal wood;
The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine,
Feels at each thread, and lives along the line.

His picture of the dying pheasant is in every one's memory, and possibly the lines of his winter piece may by this time have crossed the recollection of some of our brave adventurers in the polar enterprise.

So Zembla's rocks, the beauteous work of frost,
Rise white in air, and glitter o'er the coast;
Pale suns, unfelt at distance, roll away,
And on the impassive ice the lightnings play;
Eternal snows the growing mass supply,
Till the bright mountains prop th' incumbent sky;
As Atlas fix'd, each hoary pile appears,
The gather'd winter of a thousand years.

I am well aware that neither these nor similar instances will come up to Mr. Bowles's idea of that talent for the picturesque which he deems essential to

poetry. "The true poet," says that writer, "should have an eye attentive to "and familiar with every change of sea-"son, every variation of light and shade "of nature, every rock, every tree, and "every leaf in her secret places. He who "has not an eye to observe these, and "who cannot with a glance distinguish "every hue in her variety, must be so far "deficient in one of the essential qualities "of a poet." Every rock, every leaf, every diversity of hue in nature's variety! Assuredly this botanizing perspicacity might be essential to a Dutch flower painter; but Sophocles displays no such skill, and yet he is a genuine, a great, and affecting poet. Even in describing the desert island of Philoctetes, there is no minute observation of nature's hues in secret places. Throughout the Greek tragedians there is nothing to shew them more attentive observers of inanimate ob-

jects than other men. Pope's discrimination lay in the lights and shades of human manners, which are at least as interesting as those of rocks and leaves. In moral eloquence he is for ever *densus et instans sibi*. The mind of a poet employed in concentrating such lines as these descriptive of creative power, which

"Builds life on death, on change duration founds,
"And bids th' eternal wheels to know their rounds,"

might well be excused for not descending to the minutely picturesque. The vindictive personality of his satire is a fault of the man, and not of the poet. But his wit is not all his charm. He glows with passion in the Epistle of Eloisa, and displays a lofty feeling much above that of the satirist and the man of the world, in his prologue to Cato, and his Epistle to Lord Oxford. I know not how to

designate the possessor of such gifts but by the name of a genuine poet—

> ——— qualem vix repperit unum
> Millibus in multis hominum consultus Apollo.
>
> AUSONIUS.

Of the poets in succession to Pope I have spoken in their respective biographies.

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